

I Became a Vulpix

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A young female student wakes up one day to find herself turned into a grievously wounded vulpix having barely escaped death. After a hectic stay at a pokemon centre, she is adopted by a family and lives on as the oldest daughter's pet. Read on as she tries to adapt to her new life and to uncover the mysteries behind her transformation and her wound.

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Chapter 1

"Time of death?"

"May 20th, 1:08."

That was today's date, right? Who were the people talking? Were there people in my room?

Wait, what? Death? I wasn't dead. What was going on?

My eyes were open and I could see perfectly, but my vision was very blurry, especially on its periphery. Could they be damaged? Why? I didn't seem to be able to move them to look around the room and could only watch a large lamp above my head that was turned off, and figures of people by my side. Trying to do something that would indicate that I was not dead and they were mistaken, I realised that I could not move at all. It took me a few more seconds to notice that I was not actually breathing.

Dead? I was dead? What happened? I had gone to bed a few hours before, and I woke up... dead? The figures I saw were draped in white, wearing surgical masks and silicone gloves, moving incessantly around me, occasionally flashing a bloody hand as they put tools away. Doctors and nurses? I was in an operating room?

My heart wasn't beating, but if it were, it would be breaking records. The situation made me incredibly nervous and scared, feelings amplified by the fact my body was not answering my commands and I was paralysed. In spite of that, I needed to do something to show the surgeons I was alive and awake. Maybe they could restart my heart and save me. If not, my brain would eventually suffocate and I would actually die.

My senses seemed to be enhanced by my panic. Not a sound could escape my ears as I powerlessly laid on a surgical table. I could hear

the surgeon and nurses' hearts still racing, probably from their nervous attempts to save me. So many different smells were assaulting my frozen nose that I couldn't recognise any of them. My skin had become so sensitive I felt the bumps of the table below me, and the pressure of the air above.

Metal began clicking around me as the people in the room sighed, putting their tools away. They had given up on me. I wasn't dead!

One of the nurses put her hand above my eyes to close them. Being in panic and trying so hard to show them I needed help made her hand look much bigger than it should have been as I began feeling threatened but was entire powerless.

"Huh?" she said, visibly surprised.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't close her eyes."

"Let me see."

The surgeon brought one of those small flashlights to examine my eyes and pointed it towards me, giving me a brief glimpse of myself in the lens. I couldn't see clearly because the light blinded me shortly after, but I was absolutely positive that I saw a short muzzle covered in red-orange fur, with a tiny snout and terrified black eyes. Was that a fox?

I suddenly gasped for air as my heart abruptly restarted. A strong sensation of burning radiated from it, but the pain it gave was nothing compared to the pain I could feel in my lower gut, as if it had been skinned then covered in salt. The second I started coughing, several of the nurses rushed to me, giving me an oxygen mask to help me breathe, shouting instructions to one another. After a minute, the mask I was given was changed, and before I could understand what was going on, I lost consciousness.

I wasn't sure how long passed until I progressively awakened, still feeling dizzy and confused at first, but slowly realising that I was not dreaming and I was awake. Although my head was clearer than before while I was dead, I still didn't understand the situation I was in.

The reflection I saw in the lens of the flashlight before being blinded was a fox. I had no doubts. But... it should have been me. I was the one laying on the operating table whom the doctors of this hospital were trying to save. Did that mean I had turned into a fox? Shaking from nervousness at the idea that I wasn't dreaming and it was true, I reluctantly raised a hand to my face.

There was no hand. Only a brown paw. I tried closing it into a fist and spreading its fingers to make sure it was mine, and despite the obvious evidence, I had a hard time believing it. I had a paw. I really had become a fox.

Shock from the realisation made me freeze for several minutes as my brain was trying to find ways to counter the obvious fact that I did not want to accept. In an effort to prove myself I was either hallucinating or dreaming, I closed my eyes and shut my senses off as I could, trying to feel my body. I could feel fur softly skimming my skin - my fur. I could feel that my feet, or my hind paws, had only four fingers that I could control. I could feel a muzzle and the teeth inside it. I could feel my ears moving on top of my head. There was some longer hair that was caressing the back of my neck that I ignored. It didn't matter how much I tried to convince myself that this wasn't real. I was a fox.

I had a tail.

It took me a few seconds to realize that I did not have only one tail, but six. I couldn't exactly move them independently, but I could feel and move each one of them separately. I could feel the muscles tensing up at the end of my spine when I ordered them to do something. I could feel them brushing on one another, and on the bed.

Having a tail - or six for that matter - was indescribable, but oddly enjoyable, and I found myself moving them for fun, which happened to help me relax in a situation in which I shouldn't be relaxed at all. I was in a hospital, turned into a six-tailed fox, had just escaped death, and I had no idea what had happened or where exactly I was. What else had changed? Were my parents aware of this?

I finally noticed that I was laying on my right side, my lower gut still extremely tense and rather painful. Ignoring the pain, I forced myself to breathe slowly, trying to calm down and think, although taking deep breaths was impossible as my stomach gave me a debilitating stabbing pain if I made the mistake of inhaling too much air. After taking some time to calm down, I could finally move my head and scouted around, meaning to at least know where I was. A dark ceiling and blue walls indicated that I was in a hospital room, covered in a comfortable set of sheets. Electrodes were attached to my chest that measured my heart beat, and a tube was inserted into the wrist of my left front paw, covered in a tight bandage to ensure I wouldn't nibble it out. A regular IV hanger was standing by my bed, outside of my reach, with two large pouches of transparent liquids. I could only assume one of them was a powerful painkiller. There was a large cage on top of my bed, probably to stop me from running away.

Remembering the immense pain I felt when I tried breathing in, I extracted myself from the sheets that covered me, leaning on my right elbow to be able to see my belly. It was hidden under a massive bandage that covered the entire bottom half of my body, from the middle of the rib cage to the top of the pelvis. I had no idea what was under it, but it likely was responsible for my death, and it would probably be better not to know.

I sighed. What was I going to do? The only thing I knew was that I was now a grievously wounded six-tailed fox. I had no idea how to use this new body of mine, I didn't know what I was meant to eat, how to eat, drink, or anything other than what I probably looked like. Although I would be taken care of by humans for a certain amount of

time until I healed, I wasn't sure what would happen to me. The nurses didn't seem to be shocked by my having six tails. Did that mean that six-tailed foxes were common in this world, or were they simply too busy trying to save my life to have the freedom to stop on this weird detail? If six-tailed foxes weren't rare, then I would probably eventually be released, and I didn't see myself surviving in the wild. My situation was looking extremely bad, if not hopeless.

I didn't have much time to learn to use this new body. Trying to learn as fast as I could, I focused on the new senses that I would now have to use. The vision was very bad, as expected from a fox's eyes, but I was surprised to notice that I could see the same colours I could as a human, while foxes, like dogs, were colourblind.

My sense of smell was astounding. I could smell so many things I had no idea what most of them were, but I could definitely smell them distinctly, although I was not able to make proper use of the information this brought me. There was only one scent that I recognised, overwhelming in its perfect coverage of the room - the scent of blood.

The sense of hearing was also absurdly good, and I could hear my own heartbeat, as well as vague sounds coming from beyond the door, probably from the rest of the hospital, barely covered by the regular beeping of the machine that kept track of my heartbeat. There was another regular and slower heartbeat coming from this very room.

Turning my head towards that noise, I finally noticed a girl sleeping in an uncomfortable position on a chair by the bed. Judging by her casual clothes, she was not a nurse, but a visitor, and I found myself quietly hoping I was her pet and that she was the one who brought me in. Although I didn't like the idea of being a pet at all, I had to admit it was a much better fate than being a wild fox and eventually dying alone in some forest because I was unable to feed myself. Even without the cage covering my bed, she was out of my reach, and I couldn't get closer to try to get her to wake up. I had no choice

but to lay down calmly and wait until someone came over to try to learn what had happened to me.

I seemingly dozed off, as I was woken up by one of the nurses who was coming to check on me, dressed in the usual white blouse and a pair of wide light blue trousers, with a white nursing cap bearing a simple red cross at the front. Her hair was dyed pink and was decorated with two weird rings on the side and slightly behind her that were partially hidden under her shoulders, instantly reminding me of nurse Joy from the Pokemon games I used to play. If that was true, then my having six tails could only mean...

"Oh, hello, Vulpix," she said when she noticed I was staring at her.

So I became a vulpix. Not just a regular fox - a vulpix. Excitement briefly took over me as I began imagining myself battling other pokemon, jumping several meters high and throwing gigantic flames like in the anime. The idea of having those powers was extremely enticing, so much so that I temporarily forgot how dire my situation actually was, my brain enveloped in some powerful daydreaming.

The nurse carefully removed the cage from my bed and extended a hand towards me. "How are you feeling? I am nurse Joy, the head of the hospital. I'll be taking care of you until you recover."

So she was indeed nurse Joy, like in the games and the anime. Did that mean the world I was in was that exact one? If it was the same world as the games, then this was a pokemon centre, and I was in one of the towns I knew from the games. The nurse was talking to me as if she expected me to reply. What was I supposed to do? Could pokemon here understand humans, like in the anime? And if I answered, would I just be saying "vulpix"? How did I even talk with a muzzle? And in what language? The nurse was speaking English. What would happen if I replied in plain English? What if I made a mistake and actually spoke a human language when I wasn't meant to be able to? How would I be treated if they knew I had been transformed into a vulpix? The mysteries surrounding pokemon would be easily solved if I could communicate with them while being

a pokemon. Would that mean I would be nothing more than a lab rat until scientists had all the answers they wanted? Would I be exhibited as a circus monster, the human who became a pokemon? Would I be accepted by other humans and pokemon? Turning back into a human didn't seem very likely to happen, and I was probably stuck in this body for the rest of my life.

The idea of them discovering the truth scared me. Given I had been called "Vulpix" and was being treated like a normal animal, they might not be aware of what had happened to me, and I didn't know whether or not them discovering the truth would be a good thing for me. Did they actually know and were just playing a game with me? How intelligent was vulpix supposed to be? I decided to remain silent and just stare at the nurse. I needed to gather more information before making a decision.

"Your constants are good, at least," she said, looking at the beeping machine, apparently not upset by my lack of verbal response. "I think you're out of danger now. Still, that was quite the night for us. And for you, I suppose."

From its position on the bed, she stretched her arm forward to pet me, but I dodged the hand by pushing myself backwards.

"Shhh," she said, moving her hand slowly towards me. "There's nothing to be afraid of. I'm here to help you."

Her hand looked a lot too big now that I was a vulpix. It felt a bit scary, but at the same time, had a weird friendly scent that I could not describe. I eventually decided to allow her to touch me, and she gently stroked the back of my head, giving me a much welcome shiver of relief that actually did little to soothe me given my dire situation.

"Are you still in pain? Can you hear me?"

I still wasn't sure what to do. It seemed she was expecting an answer, and I remembered that in the anime, pokemon could nod to

say either yes or no, but this couldn't be the anime. I had to take a risk, or the nurse would start asking herself questions that might be dangerous for me. I nodded to mean that I could hear her and understand her.

"Ah, good!" she sighed, relieved. "You've lost a lot of blood. I thought there might have been brain damage. We will need to test that anyway, but for now, you need to recover. You'll be staying here for a while, I'm afraid."

She stopped petting me, which disappointed me greatly, and proceeded to gently touch my body in various places for reasons I wasn't too sure of - probably checking if my muscles were alright after the blood loss. She carefully avoided the bandaged part of my belly, which I assumed was where the wound that had caused my death was.

"You are still very tense," she noticed. "Sorry, I can't give you more morphine. You're already close to the limit. You'll have to bear with the pain for now. Are you hungry?"

I wasn't hungry at all, and the prospect of having to eat food in front of her was scary and embarrassing. I had no idea how to eat, and if she noticed that, she would start asking herself questions. I shook my head to reply.

"Can you stand?"

I stood up from my lying position as best I could, shaking with my whole body as I was making too much effort shortly after waking up from death. Standing on all fours was extremely embarrassing - all the more so because I realized I was completely naked. My tails were down, covering my bottom, and my ears kept moving towards every new sound they could detect. I didn't stay in that position for too long, for my legs soon became very tired and I just fell back on my side.

"That's pretty good news. You're going to feel very weak for a couple more days, so please don't stand if you can avoid it. You're barely recovering from the operation. I don't know how well you will heal. Time will tell. At least your life is not in danger anymore."

She stretched an arm and pushed a button by the head of the bed which I had not noticed. A faint bell rang somewhere far away, and a nurse who was not wearing that weird pink hair soon came.

"Give her some food and water and have someone watch her while she eats. If needed, help her stand still. Have someone watch her night and day. If any journalists come, you have my permission to insult them, but do not let them anywhere near her and do not answer their questions. Call security if they are being pushy. They'll have to deal with me if they want to learn anything about this, and I'll be damned if I let them disturb this vulpix."

"Understood."

The nurse with the pink hair turned to me and smiled.

"You can push that button if you need something, but do not push it for no reason or you will be punished. I have other duties to attend to, so I can't stay here, but I will visit you soon again. You might not be aware of it, but surviving this made you special."

Surviving what? Special? Was I some kind of survivor of some catastrophe? What had happened? Why did everyone play the pronoun game to make sure I didn't know what was going on? Why would journalists be interested in my case? Was there anyone able to answer my questions? Did they assume I knew?

Did *they* know? Were they aware I was a human and wanted to keep journalists from visiting me for that reason? Why else would journalists want to see a wounded vulpix? Was that why nurse Joy seemed to be expecting an answer from me earlier, and not because pokémon were on average more intelligent than animals? Did they know my actual name?

The other nurse came back shortly after with two bowls, which she put by my side as nurse Joy left, then sat on the chair that was previously occupied by the sleeping girl.

"Are you not hungry?" she asked. "Maybe you're thirsty. Can you drink? I have a feeding bottle, if you can't drink from the bowl."

I refused to drink from the feeding bottle, offended and ashamed by the idea, and tried to drink from the bowl. Unfortunately, my shaky legs couldn't support me and I dropped my muzzle into it, knocking it over and spilling water mostly over the floor.

"It's okay," the nurse said. "I'll clean that."

Unbearably thirsty, I begrudgingly resolved to drink from the feeding bottle with the nurse's help as I direly needed the water. She was nice enough not to take me on her lap and just held the bottle at a comfortable height for me to drink while laying on my side. My pride took a violent hit when I did that, but the circumstances were special, and I had no other choice. Once repleted, I pushed the bottle away with one of my front paws and sighed.

"Hey, it's not so bad! You'll heal eventually. I hope your stay here won't be a bad experience. We'll keep someone by your side to play with you if you want."

I didn't want to play. I had no idea what games foxes or pokemon played. I wanted explanations. Why was I a vulpix? Why was I wounded? Who was the girl sleeping by the bed when I woke up? Where was I? And most importantly, was I really in the anime's world? Who could answer these questions if the humans didn't know I was victim of a transformation?

Thinking about it, this world couldn't be the same as the anime's world, for the physics in the pokemon anime were close to non-existent. It was probably some kind of altered version of it, where pokemon did make sense, and I was trapped in it with no knowledge of it whatsoever. It couldn't be the same as my previous world either

for obvious reasons. I had no clue what kind of world I lived in and I had no way of gathering information about it. I was just stuck in this small room, bound to machines meant to check on my health, until I was allowed to finally leave, but that would be too late to learn anything and I would be left to my own devices. Despite being firmly atheist, I found myself praying to any god that could possibly exist to help me out of the mess I had found myself in. And I didn't even know why or how...

While I was thinking, the nurse took the bowl of food away, understanding that I would not accept to eat, and proceeded to clean the water I had spilled over the floor. She gently petted me and stroked the back of my head like nurse Joy did earlier, her eyes lowering themselves constantly as she failed to hide her sadness.

"It's sad that you have to go through this," she eventually said, noticing I was staring at her with curious eyes.

She then started talking about herself, probably to try to entertain me, but I was not listening. Was it common for humans to talk to pokemon like that? It was obvious by now that pokemon were supposed to understand human language, but I still had no idea whether or not I was supposed to be able to answer. I knew I could answer yes or no by nodding, which was a form of communication, but I didn't know how much further it could go.

"You're not listening, are you?" the nurse asked, acting upset to guilt me. "Maybe you want to sleep? It's barely 8pm, I didn't think you'd be sleepy yet, especially after sleeping so much today!"

That meant that a full day had not passed yet. It was still the... 20th of May, if I remembered correctly. Why was it so difficult to remember that single date? Was it the drugs?

"Before you sleep, there's someone who wants to see you."

She stood up and opened the door to let the visitor in. I had no idea how I did that, but I instantly recognized the odour of the girl who

was sleeping on the chair a few hours before. I was actually surprised she was allowed to stay by my side after the operation that seemingly saved my life. Wasn't access to the recovery room usually only granted to nurses, or occasionally visitors?

"Hey Vulpix," the girl said.

I could hear in her voice a lot of different emotions. She was obviously relieved that I survived, but I couldn't say she sounded very happy. She sounded more like she was just about to break into tears.

"Do you remember me?" she asked, sitting on the chair the nurse had brought for her - the very chair she was sleeping on when I woke up from the anesthetic.

I slowly moved my head from left to right, staring at her. She was a very pretty young adult, probably twenty to twenty-five at most, with absurdly smooth skin on her wonderful face. Her perfectly combed brown hair was tied in a short ponytail behind her that didn't go down more than the top of her neck, while her forehead was hidden under a masterfully executed fringe. The deep blue of her eyes made me feel envious as she was keeping them locked me, wavering rapidly in sadness.

"Ah," she said, visibly disappointed. "I'm the one who... found you. I brought you here. You don't remember what happened, do you?"

I moved my head again. If she said she found me, then I couldn't have been her pet in the first place, which meant I was a wild vulpix, which made all my fears about living in the wild come back to me. A fearful jolt pushed me back as the girl brought a hand to my head, but I allowed her to pet me in spite of my nervous reaction. She had unladylike short nails, and through her careful stroking of my head, I could feel that her hand was remarkably strong.

"She's breathing fast," she noticed. "I think I'm scaring her. I should leave."

As she withdrew her hand, I put one of my front paws on it to tell her not to leave. She tried to take it back from me as a response, believing that she was the one making me breathe so quickly out of fear, but I pushed the hand onto the bed and weakly applied pressure to it to insist. The girl smiled.

"That's not a surprise," the nurse said. "After all she's been through, it's a miracle she is still alive. And she's probably in pain right now. You should stay with her, she seems to like you."

I honestly had no clue who that girl was, but if what she said was right, then she had saved my life by bringing me to the hospital - or should I call it a pokemon centre - after finding me wounded and dying. The least I could do was show some gratitude and allow her to pet me. I knew how she felt - I was always upset when I saw stray cats and they refused to be touched.

At least, I thought it was my life she had saved, but was it? If she had "found" me as she said, then it was safe to assume that my body was actually moving before being wounded and eventually dying, which meant that it was not my body. I had taken possession of a vulpix's body. How? And what happened to the original body owner? Did she... actually die, and I somehow revived the body by taking control of it, which would explain why I was unable to breathe and was considered clinically dead, then started breathing again out of nowhere? What if they were aware of that, and the girl witnessed it and reported it? Would that be enough for them to understand I was human? The way they acted towards me didn't feel like they considered me to be human. They were petting me and talking to me as if I were a child, not a young adult, and as if I were less intelligent than them. If they knew, wouldn't they hesitate before petting me or globally treating me like a normal vulpix? And if they knew I was human, they would know I was not going to try to escape, so why the cage?

Those were too many questions I couldn't answer, and I tried my best to get them out of my head. I didn't need any more things to worry about. I was a vulpix and I had to accept it. I could at least try

to enjoy this girl carefully petting me as I held her arm between my front paws, but the feeling of being petted bothered me. Thinking back about it, I was questioning my early wish to be her pet. I didn't like the idea of being someone's pet. As a human, I enjoyed having pets a lot, and I truly loved mine, but now that I was a vulpix, I didn't want to be the pet. There were a lot of people who did love their pets, but some of them - like my parents - did not, and considered them to be nothing more than furniture. I could only assume the girl who had saved me was more like me than like my parents, but even then, being a pet didn't sound like an enjoyable thing. I didn't want to be bound to someone, to have to obey them, and have little to no freedom to do what I wanted. What would I be doing anyway? My cats spent their time sleeping, and my dogs spent their time wallowing alone in a corner hoping one of us would stop being busy on their computer and come play with them. The life of a pet didn't seem fulfilling at all. At least if I were wild, I'd have the freedom to go where I wanted, sleep when I wanted, eat when I wanted, and do what I wanted to. I would however have to hunt for food, and I would probably spend most of my day doing so, which sounded like an immense hassle. At the end of the day, I didn't actually know what I wanted, whether or not they knew I was a human, and whether or not being a pet was the best option for me, but it did feel like a much easier life.

The girl who had apparently saved my life was carefully stroking the back of my head and under my ears as I was lost in my thoughts. Raising my head to her, I noticed she was keeping that sad look in her eyes. I couldn't have been her pet, so why was she so sad? What she said implied we did not know each other. Did she love pokemon that much, or was she shaken by whatever she had seen when she found my body? Was she still worried? Was it because she knew I was a human?

A long yawn interrupted both her petting and my thinking. With a shy smile, the girl stood up, understanding it was time for her to leave, and thanked the nurse for allowing her to see me before leaving the room. The nurse took over petting me for a few seconds, put the

cage back on my bed, said she would be monitoring me via the beeping machine and a camera, and left the room, switching the lights off. Staring at the void, I laid down as I could, but most positions I tried were painful because of whatever was under the bandages I was wearing. The least uncomfortable one was to lay down on my side, my back straight, a bit like my dog used to sleep in his old age.

I was very depressed. In barely a day, my life had completely changed and taken a turn I would never have believed possible. I still had no idea what happened, but I was now certain that I was not dreaming. I had turned into a vulpix and was grievously wounded, but had survived and was stuck in a pokemon centre for an unknown amount of time. I didn't know what was going to happen to me in the future, but all I could think of while trying to fall asleep was that despite the dire situation I was in, I felt relieved, for unlike I thought when I woke up, I was well alive.

Chapter 2

I didn't sleep too well, being regularly woken up by my painful belly before falling back into a fragile slumber. The constant waking up and falling back asleep made it difficult for me to guess how long I slept, and it took me time to properly wake up as my head was still fuzzy and I was constantly questioning whether or not I was in a dream. Looking down at my hands, now paws, made it even more difficult as I didn't immediately remember the events of the night. When I finally became lucid enough to think, I began asking myself too many questions that I could not give a definite answer to. I knew that I had become a vulpix and I was persuaded that I was not dreaming, but that was about all I did know.

How long did I actually sleep? Still drowsy from my uneven sleep and probably being sedated, I scanned the room trying to find a clock, but failed to locate any. Why would there be a clock in an animal's room anyway? I couldn't see any windows either - I was alone in an enclosed heavily equipped room, but there were probably nurses awake somewhere, keeping an eye on my constants to make sure I was doing well, and possibly watching me from a camera somewhere. Nurse Joy had said I was out of danger, but my future was still uncertain. I didn't know what she meant with that and the statement worried me.

I had to know whether or not the nurses were fully aware of my situation and of my transformation, as that would probably decide what would happen to me after I recovered. The more I thought about it, the more I thought that they did not actually know and considered me a normal pokemon. The girl who apparently saved my life referred to me as a vulpix before I got wounded, which meant that before I was brought to this pokemon centre, I was already a vulpix. However, my first memory was being dead on the operating table as a pokemon, and not as a human, and all my memories before that were of my human self probably in a different world. Had this happened before? Was it possible for humans to turn into

pokemon? Or was my case unique? When exactly did I turn into a vulpix?

I had only one choice: to ask them directly. It was probably a risk, but it was the only thing I could do in my current situation. They spoke English, the same one from my previous world, so I could only assume it was the correct language to speak in. In a feeble attempt to gather courage, I nervously sat up from my laying position, cringing from the pain in my belly and the difficulty I had moving my back legs. The room I was in felt way too big for a pokemon my size, remarkably empty and completely silent, so silent that I could hear my own heartbeat coupled with the beeping machine. The lights were switched off and I could barely see anything, especially with my awful fox eyes, but I could smell so many things I didn't recognise that I caught myself wishing I had my human sense of smell back. Although the room was very comfortably warm, I was shaking widely. Taking a deep breath, I stared at the door to make sure no one was coming in and whispered as quietly as I could, afraid someone might hear me:

"Hello?"

All I could hear coming from my muzzle was my name. Vulpix. I repeated the attempt several times, trying to vary the words I was using:

"Hello? Anyone? Hi? Nurses?"

But all I could say was "vulpix". Heavily disappointed and upset, I sighed and let myself fall on my side again. It was obvious I could not talk with this body, and that made me mostly unable to communicate with other humans. There was still the option of writing, but it would be difficult with a paw. It had no opposable thumb, making it impossible to hold a pen.

My heart skipped a beat and I abruptly became annoyingly lucid when I realized what this meant. The humans were calling me vulpix, which meant vulpix was a completely normal animal, or pokemon, in

this world. This also meant that they were aware I could not talk and could only say my name, since pokémon were a usual thing, which itself meant that if they wanted to communicate with me knowing I was actually human, they would have thought of having me write or type what I wanted to say. At the end of the day, I had the answer I had been looking for: they were not aware that I was a transformed human and thought I was just a regular vulpix.

This meant two things for me. First of all, there was a chance for me to live the rest of my life as a regular pokémon. Now that I was certain that no one knew about my transformation, trying to live as a normal vulpix sounded like a better idea than telling the nurses I was a transformed human. I still didn't know whether or not such transformations were usual in this world, but if they were not, I would have an easier time hiding than trying to explain my situation. And if transformations were something that could happen, I could just find a way to tell someone I had undergone one, and they would be able to help me.

The second thing was that my future was a little less uncertain. I saw only two possibilities after I recovered: either I got released into the wild, since I apparently was a wild vulpix before being wounded, or got adopted by someone and lived my life as a pet. Although I very much disliked the idea of being a pet, it felt like the easier option for me. Being in the wild by myself would mean I would need to hunt my own food, find shelters to sleep, and I would be in constant danger. Thinking about it, it didn't sound as dramatic as I first thought when I realized I had turned into a fox. I was a vulpix, which meant I had all those pokémon powers that I could use, and hunting and surviving didn't seem to be as difficult as I imagined.

My thoughts were cut short when the lights abruptly switched on, and a grumpy looking nurse came in. It wasn't any of the nurses that I had seen before. She didn't even bother greeting me and removed the cage from my bed, looking annoyed, and checked on the bowl of water by my bed that I had not noticed. After realising the bowl was still full, the nurse looked at me with a scowl, then replaced the cage

and left without a word. She probably thought I wanted something when I was trying to say words earlier, and was annoyed at me for calling her for no reason.

This was yet another clue that indicated they didn't know I was a human, and could not understand my speech. Having too much trouble regaining my train of thought, I decided to try sleeping more, as I still felt exhausted and I wasn't quite sure I was mentally stable yet.

"Good morning, Vulpix," nurse Joy said, waking me up by taking my cage off.

I blinked several times, unhappy to be disturbed while I had managed to get proper restorative sleep. In a last attempt to try to talk to someone, I mumbled a grumpy:

"Morning."

Nurse Joy smiled and petted me on the head.

"Answering? Are you in a good mood today? That's pretty good!"

I wasn't in a particularly bright mood - my belly was still very painful in spite of the pain medication, and my situation was still not looking too good. Although I had a better idea of it, I still didn't know for sure what was going to happen to me and it was impossible for me to plan for the future.

"I'm taking you to have a CT scan," nurse Joy said, carefully removing the electrodes attached to my chest. "Let's take off all these nasty needles."

My whole body became tense as she unplugged the cannula in my legs, as if I expected it to hurt insanely as soon as it was out, but apart from some mild discomfort, I didn't feel anything. A team of stretcher bearers came in as nurse Joy quickly bandaged the tiny

hole. I jolted and sat down in a rush as my bed started moving on its own, which seemed to amuse the nurse.

"You didn't lose your reactivity, at least. That is very good news!"

She looked at me, smiling for a few seconds before giving up, disappointed I wasn't sharing her enthusiasm. On my way to the scan room, I looked around as fast as I could, but couldn't see any other pokemon. There were quite a few nurses, most of which ignored us, and a few other humans here and there that seemed to be visitors. The whole hospital felt disproportionately loud compared to my silent isolated room, and I detected a number of new odours I still couldn't recognize.

Before being put in the machine, nurse Joy gave me instructions:

"Stay as still as you can so we can get a clear image. If you don't feel well, don't hesitate to shout! You might be in pain before the exam finishes, but do your best not to move."

I nodded to say that I understood what she was saying. With a kind smile, she petted me on the head, asked me to lay on my side, and started the machine. The noises it made felt much louder and scarier as a vulpix than they did as a human, and although I was quite scared, I managed to stand still, mostly thanks to the sedatives that had not yet worn off. The whole exam took a very long time, probably half an hour, feeling like torture, but I kept a hold of myself and quietly obeyed the nurse's single order. I sighed in relief when the noises stopped and the rail started moving to get me out of the machine. After a short delay during which I was given a treat that I couldn't bring myself to eat, I was brought back to my room, plugged to the machines again, given a new cannula, and a nurse was instructed to watch me until nurse Joy's return.

She came back a lot too long afterwards, holding a weird sheet of paper that was entirely black and staring at it. She was heavily focused on it and looked like she was worried. Worried as well, I

poked her with one of my front paws as she was coming close to the bed to urge her to tell me what was going on.

"Aren't you impatient", she smiled, taking my paw off her leg and carefully making me lay down. "Don't worry, you're doing quite well. Your muscles are healing and your bowels are properly placed. Your organs show no sign of damage either."

She paused, checking the machine I was connected to.

"Your vitals are looking good, but we're going to keep you for at least a week to make sure everything is alright, then we'll be able to release you."

Release? Was I going to be released back into the wild?

No way. For a while, at least, I would have to be in a foster family until my wound healed. They couldn't possibly released a grievously wounded pokemon into the wild, especially not with a bandage. Would I be taken to a host family? Were there retreats for pokemon to be taken care of until they could be properly released?

Nurse Joy put a bowl of food next to me.

"Have you not eaten anything yet? You should. It's not good to go with an empty stomach. It's only been two days since you woke up, but you should eat regularly."

She stared at me, making me extremely uncomfortable. The bowl contained weird brown croquettes that looked somewhat soft and were absolutely not appealing to me. They had a pretty enjoyable scent, but the idea of eating dog food from a dog dish was humiliating. I didn't want to do it, let alone be seen doing it. I wanted a proper meal.

As I realised that those things would be the only food I would get to eat henceforth, my head lowered itself and I had to fight myself not to start crying. No more proper cuisine or bakery for me, especially if

I was released to the wild. No more cakes, ice cream, or any of the food I loved. Only these dull disgusting pieces of animal dry food.

As upset as I was from not having proper food to eat anymore, I was so starved that my stomach was cramping painfully at the sight of food. Sighing in resignation, I eventually decided to turn my back to the nurse and eat as quietly as I could. To my surprise, the croquettes had a very decent taste, but being unable to chew with my mouth closed made it difficult for me to eat and it took me a long time to eat everything.

Nurse Joy waited patiently until I was done, then petted me on the head, as if to congratulate me.

"You'll be given a litter box today. We don't expect you to be able to do your business yet given the wound you suffered, but you'll have it at the ready just in case."

I did my best to ignore my embarrassment at the idea of using a litter box.

"It's around noon, so we still have time for activities. Do you want to see Agnes again?"

I had no idea who Agnes was and simply nodded, curious. If the nurses were willing to let that person see me, she couldn't be all that bad, and I wouldn't be alone.

The person who entered the room was none other than the girl who had apparently saved my life. So her name was Agnes. That was a very... noble name, quite uncommon at least in my world.

"Hey Vulpix," she said as she sat on the chair nurse Joy had brought in for her. "How are you?"

Of course, she didn't expect an answer, at least not spoken, but some sign or movement that showed I was fine.

"She's alright," nurse Joy replied for me. "She's recovering well, we should be able to let her out this Sunday. We're just keeping her in for now for safety, but it will take a few months for her to recover completely."

"That's awesome!" Agnes said, genuinely relieved.

"Do you still plan on adopting her?"

"Of course. We're preparing to receive her at home."

I stopped listening at that point. I wasn't sure how to feel. In a way, I felt immensely relieved, almost happy: I wouldn't have to hunt for food, I wouldn't have to be careful about where I slept, and my life wouldn't be in constant danger. I was going to be her pet.

I was going to be a pet. Remembering my own behaviour towards my cats, my teeth gritted themselves in annoyance. Was she going to be as clingy and annoying as I had been? I couldn't think of being lifted all the time against my will, talked to as if I was a child, forced to obey stupid orders, and overall having little freedom as anything good. While my survival would be guaranteed, I would probably be restricted by a lot of rules, which would make my stay there feel like I was a prisoner rather than a member of the family. Were pokemon treated differently from regular animals because they were pokemon?

Were there any regular animals at all in this world? The anime and games didn't seem to have any and everything revolved around pokemon, but what about this world? Were there normal cats, foxes, dogs, birds, and everything? What were their relation to pokemon? Were they scared of them, could they communicate? I was basically a fire-breathing fox and I knew for sure I could bark, yelp and whine like normal foxes, so would I be able to talk to them?

"Stop by the nurses when you leave, we need to have someone watch her constantly," nurse Joy said from the door, about to leave.

"Will do," Agnes promised.

She turned to me, a hand wavering as it constantly began raising itself but returned to its original position. I could see in the way she behaved that she wanted to pet me, but was hesitating. Did she not trust me? That wouldn't be a surprise, considering I was a wounded animal and potentially dangerous. I had never shown any sign of animosity before, and vulpix was supposed to be a friendly pokemon, so why was she reluctant? Was she afraid of doing something wrong and not sure she could pet me yet? Although being petted was quite enjoyable, the idea of being touched all the time by people I did not know was very annoying. Did she count as someone I didn't know, considering she had saved my life and I had agreed to see her? Furthermore, I had an idea of how she was feeling, looking at a cute animal she wanted to pet but unsure if she would get to. In an attempt to make her feel better, I put a paw on her leg to get her attention and communicate that I was fine with her touching me. She eventually carefully laid a hand between my two large ears, displaying a shy smile, her eyes sparkling as soon as her fingers came into contact with my fur. Gaining confidence, she began petting me with more enthusiasm but still very carefully, and ended up spending an hour or so with me, just petting me softly, before leaving, saying she needed to return to class.

She was a student, obviously, although I had no idea what she was studying. Things were making more sense now: she was visiting me because she planned on taking me as a pet, and even took on her noon break to come see me. Did she want to adopt me because she saved my life? Was I already in the process of being adopted when the accident, or whatever happened to me, occurred? That didn't make much sense to me, considering she had mentioned "finding" me wounded. She had to have decided to take me in after saving me.

As expected, a nurse entered my room after Agnes left, not leaving me alone. I wasn't sure if they feared for my life still, or feared I might try to escape, but I was getting annoyed by it - I would have

appreciated to have some time alone with my thoughts without having a disturbing heartbeat to listen to other than mine. Of course, there was no way they could have known, since they thought I was just a vulpix, and I had to deal with the annoying intruder. I simply turned my back to her, groaning, and fell asleep.

Surprisingly, I slept quite well. Although my wound was still painful, it did not wake me up at all through the night, and allowed me to sleep uninterrupted. Unfortunately, I still felt exhausted when I woke up and would have liked to sleep more, but I was alone and recognised an opportunity to take some time to think. I also took the chance to use the litter box, although I was extremely ashamed of it, and went back to resting, trying to think about what being a pet would mean for me and what I needed to do to make sure to keep my problem secret.

I was disturbed not too long after when the whole corridor became extremely noisy. The metallic whirring of wheels and voices screaming instructions abruptly assaulted my ears, cutting my thinking short and causing me to jolt up. A passed by my room, but I couldn't see what was on it. Another pokemon on the verge of death, I assumed, who was taken to an operation room. Sighing, I turned my back to the door, silently cursing this unbelievably good hearing of mine, trying to go back to what I was thinking about.

Much later, the bed started rolling again, but slower. The lights in my room were switched on, and several nurses came in. One of them was nurse Joy. I stood up, joyful to see her, and tried to get her attention, but she completely ignored me. Upset, I laid down again, looking at the new bed and the pokemon on it as if they were invading my personal space.

It was an unconscious female houndour. I couldn't see clearly because of all the nurses around her, plugging her into another set of monitors and carrying different bags of liquid similar to mine. I could very clearly smell blood, as the scent was overwhelmingly present all over the room after she had come in. It wasn't an odour I was too fond of, but it made me feel a bit weird. Kind of excited, as if it was

giving me energy. Brushing that feeling off, I turned my back to this new parasite, and once again tried to recover my train of thought.

"Sorry, Vulpix," nurse Joy say once the other pokemon was properly installed. "You'll have to share your room for the time being. We are in dire need of space, and since you two... are similar, I figured this would be the best place to be in. She is unconscious for now, but she should wake up soon."

She petted me on the head as I stood up, making her reflexively hold me so I wouldn't jump off my bed and potentially destroy everything as I was still plugged to the machines.

She was right to. I wanted to go see the houndour. She had the same wound as I did, and was apparently saved as well. That would be my chance to know what she had.

"Careful now! You can't get off your bed yet. Just sit down and rest."

She stayed with me, persuaded I wouldn't obey - rightfully so. I was staring at the other pokemon, whose back was turned to me so I wouldn't see her wound. Her body was covered with the sheets, making it impossible for me to even see her bandages. I tried to insist and struggle, but nurse Joy was stronger than me and I eventually gave up. After she left put the cage back on my bed and left, I spent hours staring at the houndour through her own cage, as if I hoped I would suddenly get the ability to see through cloth, skin, fur and bandages and see exactly what wound she had, and consequently what wound I had.

In the evening, the houndour's ears twitched. She slowly turned around, looking at her surroundings and trying to understand where she was, like I had when I first woke up. She eventually noticed me and peeked at me, her twitchy breathing making her sheets jolt up irregularly as she did what she could to combat her pain, silently skimming over my body as I stared at her.

I was scared. This was the first pokemon I ever met, and I had no idea what to do. Did pokemon talk to one another? Was it even possible? Did they have a universal language, or was their understanding limited to their species?

The houndour struggled for a moment, trying to get herself in a more comfortable position, but it was obvious there was no way for her not to be in pain. Her eyes wandered around the room for a moment, wavering a fear, then she struggled again as if trying to stand up, but eventually let out a long sigh and gave up.

A new odour appeared at the door that I did not recognize. A grown man who was likely the houndour trainer rushed at her before nurse Joy removed the cage from her bed. Crying, he knelt and began talking to his pokemon, trying to reassure her as nurse Joy was trying to reassure him.

"There has been heavy damage done to her spine," she explained. "She might lose the ability to move her hind legs. She might be paralysed for life. She's not completely out of danger yet, but there is a chance she survives."

"That's alright," the man cried, hugging and petting his pokemon. "That's okay, I'll take care of you, even if you can't walk, I'll be with you."

As the houndour was hugging her trainer as best she could, I noticed she was crying. I stared at them for a few seconds before I felt like my stomach was reduced to a single atom. A cold, desperate shiver travelled up my lungs and spine to my head and eventually muzzle, and I had to fight myself not to cry.

I was alone. I had never noticed it or thought about it, but I was alone. I didn't have any family in this world, nor anyone who liked me. There was no one by my bed when I woke up, no one to stroke my head and tell me everything would be okay, no one to cry on my shoulder, no shoulder to cry on. I had woken up alone, in the dark, stuck by my realizations and my uncertain future, having barely

escaped death, and struggling with my new body. It was like my whole world had just crumbled onto me. Although I wasn't one for warm hugs, I could definitely have used some cuddling.

"What's that?" the trainer asked, turning to me.

His eyes were red and swollen from the crying. His breathing had slowed down a little and he looked relieved, although still deeply worried, and had finally started paying attention to his surroundings. His hand was still gently holding his pokemon's paw.

"She came in two days ago," nurse Joy answered. "She suffered the same wound as your pokemon did. We managed to save her and she is now recovering, so there is hope for houndour as well."

His eyes were filled with anger, guilt and jealousy as he was staring at me. I felt uncomfortable, and rather scared, but the trainer eventually forced a smile:

"Good luck, little one."

He kissed his pokemon on the forehead and was led outside by nurses. I stared at him for as long as my eyes could see him, deeply envious of the attention and love his houndour was receiving. Nurse Joy, noticing my dismay, removed the cage from my bed and sat by it, stroking my head to try to console me.

I still felt depressed. It wasn't the same thing. She wasn't my mom or my trainer. She had no actual love for me. It was her job, she was playing a role, and her role was to make me feel better. There was no true affection - just some fake professional attachment. She stayed with me for a very long time, probably hours, trying to console me, but it wasn't working. It couldn't.

The machine attached to the houndour started beeping loudly. A red light was showing on the screen. Nurse Joy instantly put me back on my bed and rushed to her, while other nurses were running into the room, screaming "code blue". The houndour's trainer was denied

access to the room and its curtains were closed. The pokemon's heart had just stopped. She was dying.

Nurses hurried around her. The houndour was given several shots of something they called epinephrine while someone was pushing on her chest to get her heart to beat again. Their efforts were unfortunately unsuccessful, and a new machine was brought in.

"Clear!" one of the nurses shouted as she applied two weird metallic objects to her chest.

There was the distinct sound of a powerful electric shock. The houndour's body jolted upwards.

"She's still not breathing. Clear!"

The nurses repeated the operation several times. The beeping machine was not throwing an alarm anyone, and was just emitting a constant high-pitched noise.

The houndour turned her head to me. The quiet huffing of her desperate attempts to breathe while her heart was not functioning became overwhelmingly loud to me as I could see the helplessness in her eyes as she was staring at me, as if hoping I could do something. After looking around the room in distress for her trainer, her eyes desperately locked onto me, trying their best to stick to something in this world. I could see the struggle and fear in her entire being as she trying to survive. The nurses were still hurrying around her when she breathed out slowly, her stare fixed on mine and mine on hers. Then, she stopped breathing for a second, and breathed out a long breath. She was dead.

"Time of death?" Nurse Joy asked.

"19:08, May 22nd."

The nurses slowly left the room while only a few, including Joy, stayed to clean up the weird shocking machine. They plugged out

the beeping one, and the whole room was abruptly thrown into a sad, lifeless silence.

I was speechless. I couldn't breathe. I was reminded of my own death, and how I abruptly I had gasped for air, was sedated, and eventually survived. My eyes were glued on the houndour, spying on every cell of her body, every hair of fur I could see moving, hoping that one of them would be her chest inflating again, that she would gasp for air like I did, that she too would survive. Everything was silent as a graveyard. Even the machine I was connected to seemed to have shut down in respect for the houndour's death. The nurses around the room had given up, slowly and silently tidying up the room, writing on papers, exchanging sad looks, like they had for me. It all felt violently surreal, as if I didn't exist on the same plane as they did, and the whole room was focused on mourning.

She never started breathing again.

The houndour's trainer came back in, limping. His legs approximately carried him by his partner's bed and failed him. He fell on his knees, shaking widely, unable to cry anymore. His head slowly fell down against his pokemon's as his back was shaken by his soft sobbing. His fingers were repeatedly stroking the back of the houndour's head, spreading the fur and looking into the skin, as if he was hoping to find a strand of life there that he could hold on to. The remaining nurses left the room, except for nurse Joy who was standing still by the other person, respectfully standing back to give him time to bid his pokemon a proper farewell. After several minutes of desperate cuddling, the trainer stood up and closed his pokemon's eyes.

He turned to me. He wasn't even crying. His face looked distant, as if he was looking beyond me, or I was a ghostly entity his brain could not quite comprehend. I wasn't even sure he was actually looking at me. Still distraught, his jaw started shaking, slowly at first, then more and more, until his teeth started grinding together and his lips were shaken by repressed tears.

"You," he said, breaking the deafening silence of the room.

He walked to me and pointed a finger towards me, shaking. After a few seconds, his eyes turned angry. It was the deepest, most intense hatred I had ever seen, and it was directed at me. The man hesitated for a second, then jumped at me.

"You!" he yelled, grabbing my throat with both hands and closing his fingers on it.

Taken by surprise, I did not have time to dodge. He lifted me above my bed by the neck, staring right into my soul.

"How dare you?" he shouted as he tried to kill me. "How dare you live when she died?"

Nurse Joy, too surprised to move until then, rushed to him and tried to make him lose his grip on my throat. Powerless, she ran to the corridor and called for help.

I was trying to make the man drop his grip. I was trying to use my hind legs to push him away, but they were weak and ineffective. Even the useless claws I had were unable to do more than gently scratch his arm. Shaking with fury, he was clenching on my throat, suffocating me, his eyes riveted on mine. Everything around me started rotating as I was losing consciousness.

The man lost his grip and fell down. I fell back on the bed, coughing and gasping for air. Nurse Joy rushed to me, giving me a mask to help me breathe, using a stethoscope to make sure I could breathe properly. I could, although it was painful, and looked at where the houndour's trainer was but a second ago.

Agnes was standing on him on the floor, controlling both of his arms with one hand, crushing his head on the ground with the other. There was no violence in her movements, only controlled strength. The man was entirely powerless. Policemen soon came in, handcuffed

the man, and took him away. Agnes was denied access to me as nurse Joy was taking care of me.

"What happened?" Agnes asked, clearly worried.

"That man attacked this vulpix," nurse Joy answered, taking her stethoscope away, holding me against her chest to reassure me.

"His houndour died, I was giving him one last chance to say goodbye to her, and... he lost it. He tried to kill her."

"Is she alright?"

"She should be. We'll know for sure in a few hours. I'll keep a close watch on her for now, but she can breathe."

Agnes looked sad at the mention of the dead houndour, but in spite of her remarkable control of herself, her hands were still shaking in worry. Understanding that there was nothing she could do to help me, she apologized to nurse Joy for fighting in a hospital and left the room, looking at me with worried eyes. I stared back at her, realizing what she had done for me. She had just saved my life. Again.

Chapter 3

Nurse Joy stayed with me for what felt like hours, holding the mask on my muzzle to help me breathe until she was satisfied with the way my heart was beating. In spite of the oxygen, my lungs felt like they were on fire, making every breath I tried to take a torture as the world was slowly stopping its confusing spin. Had nurse Joy not given me oxygen, I would probably have passed out, if not worse.

"Vulpix? Look at me."

She flashed a light in my eyes to test my reaction, making me whine and wince at the abrupt change in luminosity as my head jolted away to save my eyes from being damaged. After gently laying me back on the bed and taking the mask away, she stood up with a sigh of relief.

"You'll be fine," she said, putting the flashlight back in a pocket of her lab coat. "At least physically. I'm not sure what went through that guy's mind."

She turned around, looking at the dead houndour who was still staring at me.

"It's sad you had to see this. Don't worry, you won't die. Your wound is closing and your vitals are stable. You're out of danger."

She stayed with me while several nurses came in to take the body away, covering it with a white shroud. They were walking slowly, looking at me from the corner of their eyes, never quite daring engaging with me but worried to know if I was doing well. Sitting by my bed, Nurse Joy covered me with a hand to try to stop me from watching the nurses working, but mostly failed as I kept moving my head to stare.

I was lost. I wasn't as shocked as I would have imagined I would be after someone tried to kill me, but I didn't understand what had happened. Why had he tried to kill me? I wasn't responsible for the houndour's death. I wasn't responsible for her wound or for mine. So why? What was he trying to get revenge for?

"How dare you live when she died?"

The man's words echoed in my head. I could still see his eyes, full of hatred, staring at me while I was dying, like I was staring at his houndour while she was dying. I didn't understand why he hated me. I had done nothing.

My memory went back to before the houndour passed away. The man was kneeling by her bed, trying to comfort her, and they were both crying. I was left aside, alone, as I was left aside now, alone again, with no one to comfort me after this.

My eyes began burning as I looked nurse Joy in the eyes, then started pawing her coat, whining with insistence. All I wanted was a bit of actual affection. Some attention. Someone to hug me and tell me things would be okay. I had just escaped death a second time, and there was no one by my bed as I woke up. Again.

Nurse Joy seemed to understand what I wanted, as she told a nurse to find Agnes if she was still in the pokemon centre. The nurse obeyed, and as expected, Agnes entered the room shortly after. She walked to my bed, sitting on the chair nurse Joy had freed for her.

"I think she could use some company," nurse Joy said, her voice down. "You should stay with her for now."

Agnes nodded and turned to me as nurse Joy was leaving. I extended one of my front legs to stop her from leaving, but Agnes gently seized my paw and started massaging it.

"Hey, Vulpix," she whispered, stroking the top of my head. "You're okay now. The bad man is gone, you're going to recover, and in a

few days you'll come back home with me."

I turned my head to her, looking her right in the eyes. They were flickering. The light from the ceiling reflected poorly on the forming tears she was doing her best to withhold.

"You're fine," she repeated. "The nurses will take care of you, you'll heal, and everything will be alright."

I lost it. I had managed to courageously hold my tears back until then, but her last sentence broke me and I started crying. Weeping like a child, I crawled to her arm as she was resting against the bed, dug my way under her elbow, and nested against the side of her chest that was available to me. She covered me with her right arm, petting my head as I was quietly sobbing. Cuddling with what little part of her arm I had, I cried myself to sleep while she was softly petting me, unsure what to do.

I didn't feel any better the day after. When I woke up, I realized Agnes was gone, which brought tears back to my eyes. Once again, I was alone. Actually alone in this giant room this time, with no one to try to kill me in sight. I didn't know what was going to happen from then on. Agnes would take me as a pet... and then what? I had no idea what this meant for me, and trying to think about it gave me a headache. The rest of the week was going to be incredibly boring, and possibly painful, since there would be no one here with me. I would be alone. Always alone.

Later that day, nurse Joy came back to examine me, and seemed to be very satisfied with my healing in spite of the unfortunate encounter with the Houndour's trainer. I still felt unbearably depressed being by myself, but I told myself it would only be for a limited time while I was recovering, and there was hope that I would feel less miserable after leaving the pokemon centre. Nurse Joy spent time to try to make me play, but I didn't want to, and was just laying down on my bed, staring at whatever enabled me not to look at any human for the time being. I wanted to see Agnes.

I silently laughed at myself for breaking down and crying to the point of cuddling with another human. I had been nowhere near death, so what right did I have to be shaken by it? The whole time I had been in this body, I was repeatedly promised I was safe, and I had been, unlike that poor houndour. She had the same wound as me and was sent to an emergency room like me, so why did I survive and she didn't?

That was what the man had said. How dare I survive? It wasn't my fault. I just survived. Could I really be held responsible for living? I didn't know anything - why I was a vulpix, why I was wounded, why that man had tried to kill me - and yet, everyone seemed to be acting like I was a major player in all of it. I wasn't. I was just laying on my bed when the houndour was dying. I was just laying in my bed before I woke up turned into a vulpix. I couldn't have done anything. Her death wasn't my fault. None of this was.

The day after, I felt strangely relieved and calm, as if nothing that had happened before mattered. I was serene, and the nurses noticed when they were checking on me. It didn't seem to be weird, for nurse Joy was pretty happy with it and tried to get me to play again. Alas, although I would have been in the mood to play or do something to make time fly faster, I refused to, unsure what games I was supposed to play with humans as a fox. I just wanted this whole week to be over and finally be taken to Agnes' home, where my new life would start, and where I would no longer be alone.

I spent most of the day being taken to different rooms with all kinds of machines I did not recognize to ensure that my recovery was going well. Once again, I tried to look around to find other pokemon, but I couldn't find any. I could only see humans, most of whom seemed not to care about me, going about their business and not deigning give me any looks. Although I would have liked some positive attention, I was silently thankful for the respectful distance everyone seemed to take from me. The excessive attention I had been getting over the past four days, mostly negative, was overwhelming, and I had an urgent desire to be left alone. Although

all of this was extremely annoying, I felt like I didn't mind nor even cared. Nothing seemed to matter to me at that point. I was simply existing, free of any worries, and although I had been transformed into a creature I knew basically nothing about, I felt peaceful.

"Alright," nurse Joy smiled after all exams were done. "I'll have other nurses gather the results and I'll look at them. Until then, how about going to the gardens?"

She stared at me, obviously expecting an answer. After a long hesitation, I nodded silently, void of enthusiasm. I wasn't sure what she meant with gardens, but I could only assume it was some sort of park inside the pokemon centre for sick pokemon to play in.

The idea made my heart race. If she were to take me to that place, I would probably meet other pokemon, and that wasn't too good of an idea. I had no idea how pokemon behaved with one another, or what I was supposed to say or do, and I was worried it would be obvious that I was not a pokemon and somehow the humans would notice based on other pokemon's reaction to my behaviour. As a protest, I struggled to get off nurse Joy's arms, but I was too weak from barely moving for four days and the wound in my stomach and she held me against her chest in a comforting gesture.

"Don't worry," she said, thinking I was scared. "You won't be interacting with other pokemon at all. I'll keep you in my arms for now, but you need to see some sunlight. It's a bit late in the afternoon, but the sun is still up, so let's go now before it sets."

I turned my head to her. She was kindly smiling at me, full of confidence and friendliness. I wasn't quite ready to interact with other pokemon yet, and I wanted to avoid it for as long as possible, but her positive attitude and unshakeable optimism helped me calm down. Although I knew it would eventually happen, I was hoping to have a better understanding of my body and of how I was supposed to behave before being faced with that. If I wasn't going to interact with anyone, then I had no problems with going outside and having some fresh air.

The "gardens" nurse Joy referred to were actually so unbelievably big that the word "park" was more accurate to describe it. It was located somewhere behind the hospital buildings, from what I could understand. As big as the centre itself and meticulously taken care of, it looked very much like a natural clearance, with a few trees here and there to provide pokemon with some shade if they wanted to sleep, and even had its own pond of clear blue water.

They were accessed through several glass doors from the first floor of the buildings. I had never paid attention to it, but retracing the path we took between the different exams until we reached this place made me realise I had been kept at ground level. Thinking about it, it made sense to me: I was brought in dying or probably already dead and taken to an emergency room, which would be difficult with stairs to climb or an elevator to take. It was probably a part of the centre separated from the rest, judging from the unsettling quietness of my room, but I was thankful for it. The first floor itself was very noisy, and only when I came to deal with that much noise did I realize how good my hearing actually was now that I was a fox. When we stepped outside, the noises became completely different, changing from human conversations to pokemon noises I couldn't focus on.

What surprised me the most was the entirely new set of odours that attacked my nose as soon as the doors opened. There were so many new ones that I sneezed several times, which hurt insanely around my belly. As much as I tried to, I was unable to identify any of them. The few odours I was certain I knew - blood, human scent and my own - were completely overridden by this array of new information.

The sun was still quite high in the sky, and the whole place full of light, which mildly hurt my eyes since they got used to the darkness of my room. I didn't understand why nurse Joy said the sun was going to set. There was obviously still plenty of time before it did.

I tried to turn around and scan for other pokemon, but nurse Joy thought I was trying to get off of her arms and held me tighter.

"I can't let you walk on the grass," she said, as if to scold me. "Stand still and enjoy the sun. I'll sit on a bench, you can lay on my lap."

She did so and put me on her lap. Sitting on it, focused on what I could see, I scanned around for other pokemon again and only noticed few walking around the grass, accompanied by nurses, occasionally, their trainers. They were mostly common pokemon, like rattata, pidgey, spearow, and other basic ones, but all of them belonged to the first generation and I had no idea what pokemon could exist in this world. I could assume I would find at least the first two generations, but I didn't know how many pokemon actually existed and which ones didn't. All pokemon I could see looked like fairly normal animals: rats, mice, birds, cats, and dogs. Fortunately, none of them paid attention to me, but I did notice some humans that were not wearing a coat looking at me briefly, as if they were surprised. Was vulpix a rare pokemon around where I was?

I abruptly realized what situation I was in and felt unbearably embarrassed. I was sitting on a woman's lap, sniffing at the air and looking at everything around me like any normal fox or dog would do if instructed to stay still. I didn't realize I had done all of that instinctively, and I was ashamed of it. I, a human, was behaving like an animal.

I became ashamed of what I was thinking. I was not human anymore. I was not meant to behave like a human, and what I did was perfectly normal for me now, so why did I get so worked up over it? I would probably be a vulpix for the rest of this life, however long it was, and never recover my human body. There was no point in being ashamed of acting like I was supposed to act. I was a vulpix, and I needed to come to terms with it before I was sent to a house to live my life as a pet.

Thinking about it, I realized I was worried. I had only been transformed for four days, and I felt like I was already not in control of my own body. How long would it take for me to become a vulpix completely and have my very soul turned into a regular fox's? Would

that happen at all? Would I remain somewhat human, even after years? How much of my previous life would I be able to remember?

"Hey," nurse Joy said, interrupting my train of thoughts. "Are you falling asleep?"

I turned my head to her and noticed she was smiling peacefully. My cheeks reddened as I began feeling upset and jealous, knowing that I was going through intense emotional turmoil, being torn apart by conflicting ideas and in a very dire, although not hopeless, situation. I envied her serenity, the stability of her life, and basically everything about her. She hadn't been turned into a pokemon against her will, been catapulted into a world she knew nothing about, been mortally wounded and survived, been the unfortunate witness of another pokemon's death, been almost strangled to death by its trainer, and her life had not been completely devastated for no reason. She was happy, probably doing what she liked most for a living, and was successful at it on top of that. And she was just staring at me, smiling as if she was subconsciously mocking me for letting all of that happen.

Yet, I couldn't be angry at her, no matter how much I tried. I would have loved to find someone to hate or blame for everything that had happened to me so far, but I knew it would be delusional to think such a person existed. I desperately needed someone to vent my feelings on. I wanted to find something to bite, growl at, yelp at, scratch, and slap to get rid of this growing need to cry. She wasn't aware of my situation, and she was doing her best to improve what she knew of it and make my life better. I had no idea how, but I knew she was actually not too relaxed. She was forcing herself to smile to make me feel relaxed. It wasn't working.

I shook my head to answer her question. I wasn't exactly sleepy, considering I spent the vast majority of my time in slumber, but I felt like I was short on energy.

"The gardens are split in two different areas," nurse Joy said, as if to explain to me how it worked to avoid having to just sit in silence.

"The one close to the buildings are where we send wounded or sick pokemon that belong to a trainer to play or just rest if their condition allows them to. The part beyond the fence is where we keep wild pokemon. The pokemon centre takes care of them too, just like we're taking care of you!"

She was smiling at me, but I wasn't paying much attention to her face. I knew I was a wild pokemon, but there was one thing that I overlooked. If there were wild pokemon, then there were trained pokemon, but were they only pets or did they participate in pokemon battles too? Would I get to participate in one? What exactly was going to happen to me after I was taken in as Agnes' pet?

"Wild pokemon come here quite often. They know they can be taken care of if they are sick. We try to keep them separated from trained pokemon to avoid fights. Some wild pokemon are friendlier than others, so they are sometimes allowed in this part of the gardens. Those stay within the pokemon centre and sometimes help, and if they are lucky, someone adopts them."

Adopts? Were there no pokeballs to capture pokemon? How did "capturing" a pokemon even happen in this world? Was I wounded when Agnes was trying to capture me, and she was hiding it because she felt responsible? Was that the reason why she was willing to take me as a pet, even though she didn't seem to know me at all? Was she going to take me as a pet had I not been wounded?

"You are a lucky one," nurse Joy said, petting me on the head. "And you are by far the friendliest wild vulpix I've seen."

I yawned. Understanding that I was tired despite pretending the contrary, nurse Joy picked me up and brought me back to my room. After being plugged back to the machines, she put the cage on the bed and left. I didn't get to see Agnes that day, and it made me feel miserable to the point of crying myself to sleep.

The day after was a Friday. I only had two days left to spend in the pokemon centre, if I was released on Sunday as nurse Joy had

announced. Although the prospect of being a pet was still quite scary to me, I found myself feeling very impatient. Only a few more days and I would get to spend more time with Agnes. I was hoping she'd come visit me for a longer time over the weekend. I longed to see her and to be with her. She was the only connection I had with this world, and I really needed someone to comfort me.

Nurse Joy came in my room early in the morning. She looked somewhat angry, maybe frustrated. Her smile did not come back when she turned to me, which was unusual. Worried, I poked her with my front right paw to urge her to tell me what was going on.

"You won't like this," she said. "If it makes you feel better, I don't either. The journalists I talked about a few days ago still want to take pictures of you, and now that we know you are out of danger, I can't really stop them. I managed to delay it as much as I could, but I couldn't delay it any further."

Why would journalists be interested in my case? If the humans were not aware I was actually a human, then it had to be because of my wound - the same wound the houndour suffered and died from. Were they interested in me because I survived it? What was so special about that wound?

"I hate journalists," she confessed, removing the cage from the bed and sitting next to me, petting me softly. "They're like... flies. Always floating around when bad things happen, and then they'll suck you dry of any information you may have regardless of your mental or physical state."

She stood up, visibly annoyed at the mere thought of letting journalists enter her pokemon centre, but was still calm and friendly to me.

"We will need to wash you," she said, as if that were a warning that I would not enjoy it. "Then they'll come in this room to snap a few pictures... Hopefully only a few. Stay calm, don't growl at them, don't

bite them, don't burn them. Don't do anything without my consent. Okay?"

I nodded. She was probably right. Although I shared her hatred for journalists, I wouldn't have been able to burn them even if I wanted to. How did I use those fire powers I was supposed to have? Was there any difference between real fire and the one I would be using for fighting?

Several nurses came in to help nurse Joy wash me. Unlike what she thought, it wasn't as unpleasant as I expected it to be, but being constantly touched by so many people, sometimes in places I would rather have kept to myself, was extremely annoying and embarrassing. They removed my bandages and covered the wound in some opaque plastic film that was tight and uncomfortable, aimed at stopping water from pouring onto the scar. I stood still while they were cleaning every bit of fur they had access to, then gave me new bandages.

The lack of pokemon disturbed me. I had barely seen any pokemon in my entire stay in this pokemon centre, and the few ones I had seen were other patients. Were pokemon not supposed to help? Where were the chansey? Where were other pokemon either way? Were they not as common as they were in the games and anime? Did this world not revolve entirely around them? Or was it because I was in isolation, and thus had to be left alone as much as possible?

While they were drying my fur, I kept moving to try to see beyond the door, trying to find pokemon to feel less bothered by their noticeable absence. Nurse Joy thought I was worried about the journalists and tried to reassure me:

"They're not here yet. They will come in an hour or two, so you have time to rest more if you want. I can't stay with you, so if you want someone to be with you, just whine!"

Shortly after she left, the sheets on my bed were changed and my water bowl, food dish and litterbox were taken away so I would not

dirty myself while waiting. I spent my time trying to guess what was going to happen, having no idea how interviews worked, but I could only assume they were unpleasant. I didn't like journalists, especially the nosy kind, and I hoped that they wouldn't bother me for too long.

After a few hours, a loud rambling abruptly came from the corridor. Nurse Joy entered the room, removed my cage from the bed, and was followed in by two people I did not know, carrying a lot of equipment, most of which I did not recognize. I did notice a recorder and a microphone and could only guess they were the journalists nurse Joy reluctantly allowed to see me. The cameraman put a tripod down and attached his recorder to it while the person with the microphone took pillars he started trying to spread around me.

"Hey," nurse Joy stopped him. "What are you doing?"

"Installing lights," the journalist replied, trying to continue his work. "We're going to need lights here and..."

Nurse Joy stepped into him.

"You don't need anything you don't already have. Make this quick."

The journalist gave nurse Joy a murderous look, then dropped his now useless equipment at the back of the room behind the cameraman. He was clearly not happy about being restricted like this, but he had no other choice. Once the camera was in place, the cameraman grabbed a bigger pole with a weird puffy thing attached to it. He set the camera to focus on me.

"We're going to need it to yelp or say something," the journalist said, grabbing a clipboard. "Something that shows it's fine now."

"She," nurse Joy replied, pissed.

"Whatever. Can you get her to say something?"

"Why don't you ask her directly?"

The journalist turned to me. Before he could even open his mouth, I stood on my back legs, grabbed the puffy thing with my teeth and took the foam protection off the microphone. It was very soft and had a weird scent, but I liked its texture very much and put it between my legs, pressing against my belly, hugging it tightly.

Nurse Joy stopped the journalist from stepping forward, probably to try to rip it off from me. The cameraman was more understanding and politely asked if he could have his microphone foam back. It took me a few seconds of staring at him before I realized what I had done. Looking away embarrassed, I released my hold on the foam. After thanking me, the cameraman put it back on its pole and the interview resumed. I categorically refused to emit any sounds for them, keeping my muzzle shut and ignoring nurse Joy's orders. After a few minutes, the journalist gave up on trying to get me to do anything and asked nurse Joy to describe what happened to me.

"I want you to insist on how much of a miracle its survival is," the journalist explained. "We need viewers to be amazed. Just saying she went through surgery and is fine isn't enough. They need to realize she's a survivor. We need details, gruesome details if you can."

Although nurse Joy obviously didn't like the idea, she knew that she wouldn't need to lie at all and accepted.

"Ready... Action!"

"She was brought to us in a very critical condition. Her belly was ripped open. She lost a lot of blood by the time we had her in the emergency room. She was declared dead after a two-hour-long surgery trying to repair the damage and place her bowels correctly. Her heart started beating again shortly after, and we managed to stabilize her. She's now out of danger and waiting to be taken in a new home."

The journalist made her repeat her short speech a few times, trying to insist on a few words and how she should act while talking, but I

wasn't listening. Place my bowels correctly? Ripped open? Just what kind of gaping wound did I have? What happened to me? How did I even survive that?

After what felt like an inappropriately long time, the journalist seemed to be satisfied with the interview he took. The cameraman put his recorder on his shoulder and took several short recordings of me, asking me not to pay attention to him. I obeyed calmly, trying to be kind to the human who was kind to me. After he was done shooting, I tried to steal his puffy microphone again, but he saw it coming and withdrew his microphone too fast. Hesitating to pet me or not, he decided not to, and both journalists left.

Nurse Joy turned to me, looking visibly angry, and walked to my bed. Thinking she was going to lecture me about my lack of cooperation and trying to steal the foam, I laid on the bed on my belly, laying my ears and lowering my head, raising my eyes to look at her. As she stretched her arm and her hand approached my head, I tensed up and closed my eyes, expecting to be slapped. I was petted instead.

"That journalist one was so annoying! At least the cameraman was nice. I'm glad this is over with, now you should be at peace until we release you."

On that, she left, still mumbling bad things about journalists to herself. I felt very tired and went straight to sleep.

Saturday was uninteresting. To my disappointment, Agnes did not come to visit me at all, and final exams showed that I would indeed be going with her the day after. I felt extremely impatient, and that made the day last unbearably long. Fortunately, it didn't last forever, and it was eventually Sunday.

I woke up very early, being nervous and very impatient. It was much too early for anyone to be awake, and I just waited alone for hours, pondering whether or not I was right to be impatient. I was finally going to get away from the pokemon centre and be able to move and discover this new body of mine more in-depth, but I had no idea what

was going to happen once I was out, and it scared me. What if Agnes, or her family, were abusive people? I had a hard time thinking they would be, considering how I had been treated up until that point, but I was still quite worried. Hopefully I would have time to learn how to use my powers by myself before she made me participate in battles. The wound I had felt like a ticking clock as it gave me an excuse not to be thrown into combat, and I found myself becoming stressed at the idea of recovering.

When it was finally time for me to leave, Agnes was the one who came to pick me up. After sitting by my side, smiling widely, she told me to follow her, explaining that traditionally, pokemon who were going out of the centre in good health were asked to walk by their trainers to the exit as a proof of recovery.

As she made her request, I was struck with a sudden realization: I had no idea how to walk and the mere idea of walking on all fours was extremely embarrassing to me. I had never even stood up since I woke up transformed into a vulpix. I had only ever been sitting or laying. Before I had found time to ponder how to properly behave, I was requested to get on the floor among too many people and walk beside her. Paralysed by fear, I didn't move from the comfort of the hospital bed I had been stuck on.

After a few minutes, nurse Joy gently grabbed me and put me on the floor, then asked me to walk a few steps. Reluctant, I stood up as I could, shaking from the nerves, and took a step forward, my eyes focused on the ground as I did not dare look at Agnes who was squatting by the door, her arms stretched towards me as an invitation. After hesitating for a long time, I decided to try walking, aware that I had no other choice. Although my legs felt numb and very weak, walking proved to be easy and intuitive, and I had no trouble walking up to the girl who was now my trainer. As I expected, I felt embarrassed from being stared at and scared of walking weirdly enough for the nurses to pick up on it, but unlike what I thought, I couldn't feel the ground under my pads at all. It was very unsettling, as I was used to the very sensitive human soles, but at least I felt

less worried about having my "feet" dirty as I used to be as a human. When I finally reached her, Agnes gently petted my head, and I followed her outside of the room and to the hall.

Nurses and doctors were gathering in it, obviously waiting for me. As Agnes and I stepped into the hall, a loud wave of clapping soared, drowning the large hall in an oppressive clamour. Agnes was smiling, but I was nervous, and clumsily followed her through the corridor of people, walking as close to her leg as I could. Nurse Joy opened the main doors for us, and as Agnes went outside, I froze by the doorstep.

That was it. That was the end of my first week as a vulpix and of my stay in the hospital. I had never been outside on the floor before, and had only ever spent a few minutes under the sun. The moment I put a foot outside of the boundaries of the pokemon centre, I would not be by myself anymore, kept in a clean room as a random wild pokemon who had survived a lethal wound, wired to machines meant to check on my health at every moment. I was going to be a pet.

Agnes stopped a few metres away from me, turning around to wait as I was still unable to make a decision. Still hesitant, I glanced behind me, noticing everyone smiling as they were patiently waiting for me to step outside, as if it had a symbolic meaning, as if I was freeing myself of their care by doing so on my own, and putting myself under my now trainer's instead.

"Come on, Vulpix," Agnes said, kneeling and inviting me to go to her. "The family's waiting."

I felt a shiver across my spine, the likes of I had never felt before. Shouting in happiness, I jumped forward and walked as fast as I could towards Agnes, who picked me up and brought me to her car, and into my new life.

Chapter 4

I followed Agnes to her car, my walking made approximate by the general weakness of my body from my week of forced bed rest and the fact that I wasn't sure how to properly walk just yet. Although I was walking slowly, she was patient and simply adopted my pace, understanding the exercise was difficult for me. Walking on all fours was a weird feeling, especially given my legs had a different size from when I tried it as a human and my body wasn't bent forward, but it wasn't as embarrassing as I expected it to be. While I could feel my tails wagging slowly behind me, I was surprised not to feel anything under my paws as I walked on the concrete, and it was unsettling. Used to the tactile feedback of my human feet, even through socks and shoes, I felt like I was walking on nothing and I was scared of stepping into something sharp and hurting those little paws of mine.

When we arrived to her car, I was surprised to see how big it felt now that I was a vulpix. It was a very average car one would expect from a student, of a shiny red colour reflecting the sun almost too much, blinding me when I was looking at it. I was about as big as the wheels, and in spite of my efforts, I failed to see myself in the rim that seemed to be worn and had lost its chrome finish. Disappointed, I didn't notice the plastic cage Agnes pulled out until she opened it and asked me to walk into it.

I was being put in a cage again. No one seemed to trust me, which made sense, but it was very upsetting for me. I was being restricted once more, as I had been my entire first week as a vulpix. Was there no freedom for me? Would I spend the rest of my life in a cage? Was I going to be no more than a fighting dog, risking my life for the entertainment of people who never ever liked me?

I backed off from the cage, refusing to step into it. I didn't want to be a prisoner anymore. If she wasn't going to at least give me some

freedom, I would probably be better off running away and trying to live by myself.

"What's wrong?" Agnes asked, kneeling to pet me.

I instinctively stepped back before realising it was her hand and allowed her to pet me. She tried to softly push me into the cage, but I resisted, and after a few seconds of struggle, she stopped insisting and tried to convince me instead of forcing me:

"The cage is here for your safety. Look."

She showed me the inside of the car, drawing a safety belt to support her claims. I turned my head away, pouting to show my discontent, but eventually gave in to her begging and accepted to be in the cage as I had no other choice. If it was just a matter of security as she claimed, then it would hopefully be a rare occurrence limited to car trips. I could probably live with that, and I had the disturbing feeling I did not actually have a say in the matter. As promised, she drew the security belt over the cage to secure it, installed herself in the driver seat and started the car.

I didn't pay any attention to the trip from the pokemon centre to Agnes' house. I was busy sniffing at the cage. I could recognize at least three different odours, all of which were very similar to mine. Two of them were very faint, while the third one was a bit stronger, but none of them was as strong as Agnes' scent was on her car. Did those odours belong to other vulpix? I had no idea how to tell the different components of each scent apart. All three were similar to mine, two more than the third one. Assuming they did belong to other vulpix that were previous pets, why were they not completely identical to mine, save for the individual odour part that I couldn't identify anyway? Was it the age? In that case, two of the vulpix were about the same age as me, and the other one was either older or younger. Was that right? I had the feeling I was guessing wrong. There were too many things I was smelling, but age would probably have been part of the individual odours. In this case, there was the

exact same part as mine for two of them, and the third one differed slightly, but still felt similar.

When the car stopped for a moment, Agnes extended an arm to slip a finger through the plastic cage and try to pet me. As I was making efforts to stick my muzzle on her finger, I smelt on her the same odour I was unable to identify. Puzzled, I took time to think about it.

The answer hit me like a truck. Agnes and I did share that odour, and both of us were female. It was more or less the only thing we had in common. Did that mean those things I was smelling so strongly were pheromones? Did that mean that out of the three vulpix that had been in this cage, two were female, and the other one male? Then, what happened to those vulpix? Why were their odours so faint, feeling like mere remnants of a past memory the cage wanted to keep of them? Were they dead? Did they evolve, and become too big to fit in? Were they simply not using the cage anymore for some reason? If they were dead, then they had been dead for a while already, and that could explain why Agnes decided to adopt me. And if they weren't, then it meant using the cage was indeed a rare thing, and Agnes was not lying when she said it was for my safety. I felt reassured by the idea of finally being given actual freedom to move, but nothing was set in stone yet. I didn't know what I was getting into, and I got more nervous as the car kept going and I knew I was getting closer to Agnes' home.

When the car finally stopped, I thought my heart was going to stop because of how fast it was beating. This was the beginning - second beginning - of my new life. I was now Agnes' pet for sure, which meant I would have to obey her every order, was expected to play whatever games foxes played, and expected to cuddle and act all lovey-dovey with her, which I frankly wasn't too excited for. I had no idea what kind of family she had, or how she would treat me, and I was silently praying for her family to be kind. Above all, now that I was relatively free to move, I was worried they might figure out I was not actually a vulpix. What worried me most were the three odours I smelt in the cage. If there was at least one of them still alive, would

they welcome me? How would they react? Would they notice I wasn't behaving normally?

Agnes opened the door of her car and freed me from the cage. My heart still racing so much it made my eyes jolt in rhythm, I scanned around to try to see in what kind of house she lived.

The only thing I could see was a massive building that looked nothing like a house. It was a manor or a castle or a mansion. It was ridiculously big, but not very tall. I could count three floors, plus one that seemed to be smaller directly from the ground, probably some kind of cave, as it has no visible windows. The building was made of some very old stone, its grey discoloured tones contrasting weirdly with the vibrant greens of the vegetation that surrounded it.

Remarkably clean and worn out, the stairs leading to the elevated entrance were beautifully carved and curved, as was the front porch, decorated like a roman temple. The centre of the building was flat, apart from a circular bump in the entrance, but the sides seemed to come towards me. They were clearly not rectangles, and were not round either. They were some sort of polygon, but I wasn't sure how many sides there were, and I wouldn't have the freedom to run around them to count. Breaking the monotony of the flat stone were two tall windows per discernable side of the mansion and per floor, and the circular part only had one window that was smaller and located higher than the other ones. The roof was blue and of changing heights, decorated scarcely with chimneys that didn't look like they were used at all. I had no idea how big the whole mansion was, but I was sure of one thing: Agnes or at least her family was outrageously rich.

As Agnes walked to the door, carrying me in her arms, I took time to look at the garden. I felt like I was in a park more than someone's garden. It was so big I couldn't even see the fence from where I was. I could see a gravel road leading to the mansion, and a smaller one leading to a side building in which Agnes had parked her car. Trees were regularly planted along the road and provided it with much

needed shade. I couldn't see much more as Agnes was stepping in the mansion.

After going through some sort of glass room that was probably the round part of the entrance, she opened the door leading to the main hall. After putting me on the floor, gave her coat and bag to a butler who had come to welcome her, and ordered me to sit and stay still. Laughing for myself about how cliché this was, I obeyed, barely taking measure of the size of the hall I found myself in. There was a beautiful chandelier hanging from the ceiling, made in a shiny metal that I couldn't identify because of the bad vision of my new body. The floor was made of white marble, regularly broken into pathways made from soft red carpets. I was disappointed not to see any armour decorating the hallways, but the expertly made furniture largely made up for it.

"Find Mother and Father, please," Agnes told the butler she gave her clothes to.

She turned to me, kneeling to pet me, visibly amused by my open muzzle and wide eyes.

"Do you like it?" she asked. "Welcome to the Trokair manor!"

I did like it, but above all, I was amazed. The idea of living in such a luxurious house was very exciting. I couldn't wait to explore the whole building and see what was behind each of the windows I saw from the outside.

"Hello, Mother, Father!" Agnes said, standing up and greeting the two people who were coming down the stairs.

Her parents were both wearing suits, and were fitting exactly in the rich parents cliché. Her dad was thin and obviously strong, perfectly shaved and with fairly long very dark hair. Her mother was very tall, wearing a pencil skirt, her hair tied in a ponytail behind her head. I didn't focus too much on Agnes' parents, as something else caught my eye instantly. There was a ninetales walking by their side.

She was stunningly beautiful. Her fur was of a marvellous light beige colour and was shining as if she were a model for some brand of shampoo. She had a long mane coming from the top of her head that elegantly fell on the back of her neck and a perfectly combed collar of fur covered her luxurious chest. Her limbs looked thin, which gave her a very noble look, and a very long muzzle, probably longer than mine. She had nine very long tails, spread in a fan and floating freely behind her as she was walking by her master, tipped in an orange fur similar to the colour of my own tails. The stern but polite look on her face gave her an extremely mature look as she was heeling her master in silence. I knew she had noticed me, or she would at least have been notified I was coming, but she didn't look at me until Agnes' parents and she reached us.

Agnes picked me up, petting me to reassure me after she noticed I was shaking, and made me sit on her arm as if she were carrying a baby. I felt embarrassed by it, but that position was very comfortable, and Agnes' fingers combing the fur on my head was relaxing.

"I assume this is the one?" her father asked.

"It is," Agnes replied with confidence. "We just came home from the pokemon centre. I have to go back tomorrow to finalize paperwork, but she is more or less officially my pokemon now."

"Still haven't found a name?"

"Not yet, but I'm confident I will have found one by tomorrow."

"Let me see," her father asked, stretching his arms forward to request to hold me.

Scared by the man's impressively big hands, I tucked my head in my shoulders, laying my ears and lowering my muzzle to avoid being touched, but Agnes ignored it and gave me to her father. He carefully picked me up, holding me from under my arms, staring straight into my eyes. I made sure not to move and noticed my tails were covering my body, that was completely still. The man looked at me

for a few seconds in that position, then smiled. He put me on his arm like Agnes did just before and started petting me.

Although I was still scared, I turned around to smell his neck, curious to try to learn more about him and assuming that it would be expected of me. His scent was similar to Agnes', and I could differentiate the part I assumed were pheromones on him. It turned out I was right, and I felt proud of it, feeling like I was starting to learn how to properly use my senses. A few seconds of intense sniffing allowed me to also differentiate the part that seemed to be common to humans, but I still had pretty much no idea what else I was actually smelling.

Agnes' mother walked up to me and stretched a hand to pet me as well. I tucked my head in my shoulders again before allowing her to touch me and sniffing the hand that was at my reach. She didn't pet me for too long and stopped, heading back up the stairs stating that this wasn't any of her business.

I felt relieved when she left. There was something about her that made me uncomfortable, as her smell felt somewhat foul, at least rather unpleasant. Smelling the man again, I realised his odour was much more enjoyable, almost friendly, and decided I should trust him, as he was probably the head of the house I was going to live in. With a deep sigh, I gently laid my head against his shoulder.

"She is friendly!" the man laughed, taking me off his shoulder and giving me back to Agnes.

"That's... surprising," Agnes said, petting me and holding me tight to reassure me.

Her father didn't seem to understand her reaction, but I was pretty sure I did. After the houndour's trainer had tried to strangle me, it was expected I would be scared of humans, especially men.

"I like her," her father said eventually. "Welcome in, little one."

He turned to his daughter.

"So... Do we have more information on what happened to her?"

I turned my head instantly and focused on the conversation. Was I finally going to know?

"No," Agnes replied, going back to petting me after noticing I seemed interested. "We don't know what or who did this to her. The police didn't even visit. They don't seem to be interested. There were journalists, though, but they are just annoying."

"I will instruct the servants not to let any journalist visit her," Agnes' father said. "She doesn't need to be stressed."

"I hope I won't be questioned at school," Agnes replied. "I know there is an investigation going on, but I'm not sure if she is part of it."

"She probably will," the man replied, sighing. "As far as we know, she is the only survivor. That makes her very special."

Did I survive something? I was the only one who did? What exactly happened? Would I ever get a definite answer? Why was everyone being so cryptic?

Agnes mentioned something or someone did that to me. Did that mean that what happened to me was not an accident? Did someone try to kill me? Was that why I was considered special, why I was visited by journalist, and why there was an investigation I might be a part of?

Did that mean that the houndour that died in my room was also a victim of whatever happened to me? Was that why the man was angry at me? Because I survived something his pokemon died of? Because I was the only one to survive it? That still didn't explain what had happened to me. I was pretty sure by then that I was victim of an attack, part of a series of murders the police were investigating. I didn't know the details or what exactly happened to me, but that

explained a few things. In that case, why was I attacked? Why was the houndour attacked? Who was responsible for this? Were they responsible for my transformation too?

"Good luck to you," Agnes' father said, petting the top of my muzzle gently. "You will stay in the house until your recovery is complete. Don't overdo it and try to relax. You will need to rest."

He kissed his daughter on the forehead.

"I have more work to do. I'm glad you brought this one home, I think she will be happy here. You've been looking for a pokemon for a while, now you have one!"

He petted the ninetales on the head, then left. His pokemon didn't move, staring at him until he was out of his sight, then turned to Agnes.

"Hey you!" she said, putting me on the floor to kneel so the ninetales could come cuddle with her. "Remember the vulpix I talked about? Here she is! Come on, don't be shy."

That last sentence was for me. Scared of the other pokemon in the room, I was hiding as I could behind Agnes' legs, hoping that she would leave me alone. She was almost twice as big as me, and looked so much more mature that I felt inappropriate compared to her, but above all, I was scared of interacting with her. I was remembering all the questions I was asking myself. What if I made a mistake and she figured out I was not a vulpix? Should I tell her right away?

"I'll leave you two together," Agnes said. "Show her around and give her instructions, okay? You'll be responsible for her behaviour!"

The ninetales nodded, then Agnes left. The pokemon stared at me as I was curling up, trying to get as small as I could, hoping she would forget about it. She sat down and simply looked at me for several minutes, probably waiting to see how I would react. The

more time passed, the smaller I was trying to become, and I would gladly have disappeared right that instant if I could. There was unfortunately nothing I could do to avoid the interaction, and after walking in place for a few seconds, I sat down, trying to control my heart rate.

"Hello!" she said.

Her high-pitched voice was stunningly pretty. She sounded extremely kind, and the way her voice vibrated felt comforting and friendly.

I realised that, although I understood she was greeting me, I could clearly hear "ninetales" and not "hello". This puzzled me immensely. That obviously meant that pokemon could communicate with one another, but was I supposed to reply in plain English? Anything else didn't make much sense to me, and I gave it a try, tensing up, not quite ready to face the consequences if I was wrong:

"Hi," I muttered.

Compared to hers, my voice felt rude and immature. It was lower pitched, and felt much less patient and friendly, but I still thought it was cute, although in a more childish kind of way.

The ninetales seemed to be very excited by my answering. She stood up, walked a few sidesteps, then bent over to sniff at me for a very short moment, laughing silently.

"Welcome!" she said, standing up in her usual noble stance. "My name is Topa. I will be responsible for you until you recover. Agnes did not give you a name yet, so I will just call you Vulpix. Do you mind?"

I wasn't sure if I should answer or not. She scared me. She was clearly an adult, and I felt like a child compared to her. Worse than a child, for I was not even the same species, evolution tree aside. I at least felt a bit better, thinking I had a partial answer to one of my

questions. One of the vulpix I smelt in the cage was the ninetales, and she was not using it anymore because she evolved. That gave me hope I wouldn't have to be put in a cage anymore.

"Okay," I whispered as if I hoped she would not hear me.

"You are cute!" she said, sitting down to look less impressive. "You seem to be pretty shy, too. I hope I am not being invasive."

I was surprised by how polite she was. Were pokemon about as intelligent as regular animals, or more? Did they have social norms? Was she just behaving the way she had been taught to behave with humans? I didn't feel like I was interacting with a fox. This very much felt like a conversation with another human being, and it disturbed me immensely. I was barely taking measure of how little I actually knew of this world.

"No, sorry, I... I mean, this is a bit scary, this place is so big, there are so many people, it's too new for me."

"You spent the last week in a pokemon centre, did you not? I suppose you are used to the quiet rooms. Do not worry, neither the maids nor the butlers will bother you. They know you have been injured and have been instructed not to disturb you."

"Okay," I replied, unsure of what to say.

I felt relieved to know my interactions with other humans would be limited for the time being. I didn't feel ready for that yet. I was hoping to observe the way the ninetales behaved and copy it to try to pass as a fox before I had to face the world as one.

"The property is rather big, but you will not be granted access to all of it. Do you want me to show you around? There are also quite a few rules you need to know. I apologize for drowning you in information right as you come in, but it is important."

"No, that's fine," I replied with a bit more confidence.

The idea of walking and talking with the ninetales felt appealing. Being told the rules of the place would at least give me a better idea of the kind of life I was going to live. Agnes' parents seemed to be kind, at least her father, the ninetales seemed to be extremely kind as well, and she was visibly very happy, even excited to have me around. For the first time since I woke up as a vulpix, I felt optimistic. I was certain this place was going to be great.

"Alright. You seem to be tired. Can you walk?"

"Yes," I replied, although I wasn't sure I could. "My belly hurts, but I did nothing for a week, I need to move."

I let her walk a few steps first, carefully analysing the way she walked, before jumping from my sitting position to follow her and copy her movement as best I could. I was pleased to notice that I had been naturally walking properly in spite of my inexperience, although the pain in my gut made me stumble at times and generally limp with difficulty. I felt somewhat excited, almost impatient, at the idea of walking around in the property. It was so big, there had to be numerous things to explore and discover. Above all, despite my early worry, I felt relieved to have a ninetales take care of me. Not only would it make it easier for me to learn how to behave as a fox, but it would also mean I wouldn't have to worry about anything much until I was properly healed.

Starting from the entrance hall, we went to the left into a very large corridor. There were two doors on each side of it, and another one at the end. The first one on our right was open and ninetales lead me into it. It was a big room with the biggest TV screen I had ever seen embedded into a wall on the right, facing several couches and a small table. The room was slightly decorated with multiple pieces of furniture, probably hosting stuff to be used with the screen. There also was a table of reasonable size by the entrance with six chairs spread around it. On the other side, directly facing the table, two magnificent cupboards surrounded a beautifully crafted fireplace. I could only guess that the cupboards had somewhere a wood stash

to feed it. The fireplace was surprisingly clean, and completely empty.

"Humans call this the lounge," Ninetales explained. "It is permanently open. Feel free to go around to smell things. We are allowed to come here at any time, but do not touch the furniture and do not step into the fireplace. Also, do not climb on the couches or chairs unless someone invites you to. The table is obviously completely forbidden."

I waited until she finished explaining to start walking around, sniffing at everything I could find. I couldn't smell anything new, which felt very boring. The whole place was disturbingly clean. Going to the couches, I noticed there were three big couches and two smaller ones. One of them was very long and was parallel to the TV, while the two on the side were tilted and much smaller. Between the big couch and the tilted ones were two small round couches, probably meant for ninetales to lay on. The dark blue colour of the couches contrasted with the generally red palette of the walls and floor.

"You can lay on the round couches any time if you want."

I jumped onto one of the small couches. It was very floppy and that felt disturbing. I jumped down, unsatisfied.

"I do not like them either," Ninetales said, amused by my reaction. "The big ones are much more comfortable."

She then led me to the room facing the lounge.

"This is a gym for the humans," she explained. "The door is generally closed, but if someone is in, you can enter. Just make sure not to disturb them while they are exercising. Do not enter this if no one is inside."

"How do I know if there is someone inside?"

"They will leave the door open. Generally, remember this: do not try to enter closed doors."

That sounded like a simple guideline, but I felt disappointed. There were probably a lot of closed doors, which meant there were a lot of rooms I would not get to explore. If that room was as big as the one we just excited, I couldn't wait to see what kind of equipment was in it.

"Behind this is a huge library," Topa said, pointing to the end of the corridor with her muzzle. "Access is strictly forbidden. Do not enter under any circumstances!"

Obviously. I felt sad not to get to visit it. As a human, I loved reading, and visiting a massive library would have been an awesome experience, but I was not human anymore, and reading would certainly be something I was going to miss.

Ninetales then took me to the door directly to the left of the end of the corridor and asked me to walk in. That room was very weird. The floor and the walls were covered in a somewhat soft mat and the room was completely empty.

"This is the pokemon sports room," she explained proudly. "This is meant for us to play, practice, or fight. The mats you see here and on the walls are fireproof, so there is no risk of setting anything on fire."

She looked away as she said that, blushing slightly.

"I look forward to your recovery," she added. "I think this is where we will spend most of our time. At least I hope so!"

I wasn't too sure about that. The idea of fighting, battling, or whatever it was scared me. Would I get wounded? How dangerous were pokemon battles? How did they even happen? I was certainly not ready for it, and I was scared of her finding out. I didn't even know how to use my powers.

The rest of the house was fairly boring. The last room in the left wing was a music room, to which I was not granted access. As I thought, a majority of the rooms were closed. The right wing of the house had a kitchen on one of the sides of the corridor, and a ballroom at the end of it. Unfortunately, the ballroom was closed, and I did not get to see it, although I was extremely curious. Ninetales told me it only opened on rare occasions, and was a massive mostly empty room, which was rather boring. This family didn't seem to be a very festive one, and most of their immense house was left unused.

The second floor had bedrooms. Ninetales didn't even bother showing me anything and took me straight to the right wing, at the end of the corridor. There was no door, but the corridor continued then split into three smaller ones. I counted, in total, 8 rooms, each corridor leading to one of them. Ninetales took me to the end of the corridor straight ahead, then turned around, looking back at the centre of the building.

"The room on the right is the parents' room. The one on the left here is Melissa's".

"Melissa?"

"Oh. She is not here now, she is staying over at a friend's for work. She is Agnes' younger sister."

I didn't dare ask how young she was, but I was hoping she wasn't too young. I didn't want to have to deal with an annoying kid on top of all my problems, especially not before I could pass as a fox.

"If you take the corridor on the left, you'll find Agnes' room. The other rooms except one are guest rooms and are rarely used. No matter what happens, we are not allowed into the bedrooms, even if the doors are open. We can only stay in ours."

Ninetales then took me to the corridor entrance. There was a room on the left that had no door. It was her room. There was a bathroom in it with everything one would expect from a human's bedroom,

except the bed was replaced with two thin couches. One of them was yellow and the other one brown. There was a wall separating the bedroom from the bathroom part, and we were generally not allowed to the toilet and shower. There was a litter box next to its door.

"That is for you," Ninetales said. "You will not be allowed in the gardens until you have fully recovered, so this will have to do for now. The yellow pillow is for me, and the brown one for you!"

I felt upset I would have to use a litter box again, but it was inevitable. I had become used to it in the pokemon centre, but the idea of being seen by another pokemon embarrassed me.

"I have never been to the third floor," Ninetales said as she nested on her couch. "I only know it is where the maids and butlers live."

She yawned.

"Did you understand everything? You might be lost for the first few days, but you will find your way pretty easily after that."

"Yes," I replied.

The rules were very similar to the ones my family applied to my dogs. I felt sad to have been restricting them for so long without knowing what exactly it did to them. Although this place was ridiculously big, I felt like I was a prisoner. I wasn't even free to go where I wanted.

"We still have time before dinner," Ninetales said, stretching. "Do you want to do anything?"

"I don't know," I replied, suddenly gloomy. "I should probably rest."

I was faced with a reality I never thought about until then. I had nothing to do. As a human, I would waste my days on my computer or reading, but as a fox, I had access to none of those, and my

wound did not allow me to go in the gardens to at least walk or run. There was absolutely nothing to do as I did not see any toys in the room. Even if there were any, would I be using them? I had no idea how foxes played. I had no idea about anything.

I looked at Topa, who was laying down and obviously ready for a nap. She was the answer. I could ask her anything I wanted about foxes, and she could tell me how to act like one. She could be my mentor, but that required telling her I was human, and I didn't know if she would believe me. What would I do if she didn't? What if she did believe me and somehow told Agnes and her family? Would they get rid of me? Would they sell me to scientists? Could I trust her?

What if I did not? I would eventually be confronted to a situation where I would have to use my powers, and it was obvious to me I did not know how to use them. I needed her to teach me, unless I spent my days in the pokemon sports room practising by myself. Even then, the chances she would sneak up on me and find out were too high. I needed to tell her.

I opened my muzzle, trembling heavily, before I noticed she was sleeping. Sighing deeply, I walked to my own pillow and laid down on it. I probably should wait before telling her, as she had known me for a few hours at best, and was probably not ready to hear the truth. I certainly wasn't ready to tell her. Deciding that postponing would be best, I closed my eyes, hoping to rest. I could tell her the following day.

Chapter 5

I woke up silently from my nap, feeling tired but not sleepy anymore. Keeping my eyes closed, I remained immobile for a few minutes, trying to enjoy my rest while I could. I remembered that my stay at the pokemon centre was over, and I had been taken in as a pet in this gigantic manor, but I couldn't remember much of what the ninetales had said. I only remembered that it was similar to the rules my family forced on their dogs and decided to just follow those.

While my eyes were closed, I focused on what my other senses were detecting. I could smell the ninetales close to me, although I couldn't figure out whether she was actually there or it was just her scent on her pillow. I could smell my own scent on my own pillow, and the scent of all the humans that had been in here. I was surprised by how faint the odour of Agnes' parents was, as if they had never come in this room and the only traces of their scent had been carried into it by others. Agnes' odour, on the other hand, was overwhelming, but it made the place strangely reassuring. Agnes was probably the only person I could trust in this world, and my only actual link to it.

The manor was fairly silent, considering the number of people who lived in it. I could vaguely hear cooks making dinner, Agnes' parents' voices although I could not distinctly understand what they were saying, and other voices I did not recognise, probably belonging to the maids and butlers. I could hear my own heart beating. Surprisingly calm and slow-paced, I could hear my own relaxed heartbeat, sign of how different my life had become in just a few hours of being in this manor compared to the constant exhaustion and anxiety I was subjected to in the hospital. I took a moment to appreciate the unusual quiet of the place I was now in, aware that I was actually not nervous and felt at ease, until I realised there was another heart beating in the room, not as fast as mine and not coming from the ninetales' pillow.

I jolted awake, opening my eyes and scanning quickly around me. Agnes was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to me, a book open on her lap. Eyes slightly widened by my abrupt movement, she smiled in my direction before closing the book she was holding.

"Hey, are you finally awake?"

A yawn was my answer, accompanied with a long stretch as I lazily got up. My stiff and painful belly cut my exercise short, but I was fairly rested, although not quite awake yet. I staggered towards Agnes, then climbed on her lap as she put her book aside to make room for me. Still sleepy, I let myself fall on my side, pushing her chest a bit, getting ready to finish my night.

"You can't go back to sleep now," Agnes said, petting my head. "Dinner is about to be served. Did Topa explain to you how you will be fed?"

I shook my head.

"There are two meals for you: one in the morning and one in the evening. You'll be eating with the family in the living room, the one with the big TV screen. Maids and butlers have their own kitchen and generally eat before we do. You'll have your own dish and your own food. Don't ask to have a taste of what we are eating, my parents will not appreciate that."

I sighed and walked away from Agnes' lap to go back to my pillow, pouting and annoyed. More rules, more restrictions, and again, less freedom for me to do what I wanted. The abrupt realisation that I would probably never get to eat proper food and would have to stick with that tasteless pokemon dry food or this disgusting pâté served to animals made me transiently sad.

Agnes stood up and grabbed me, carrying me like a baby as she used to - probably more out of concern for my wounded belly than because she enjoyed carrying me that way. She took me downstairs into the living room and put me down next to the sofas, where

Agnes' father was watching TV, sitting on the biggest couch while petting Topa who was laying down next to him. A brief peek at the screen indicated he wasn't watching anything that looked very interesting. It was full of numbers and graphs, and I assumed it had something to do with a sort of stock exchange. Maids were busy dressing the table for three.

"Hey," Agnes' father said when he noticed her. "Your mother will join us soon, she is in a call for the firm. Melissa is staying over at her friend's for the night."

"Alright," Agnes answered, sitting down next to Topa.

The ninetales woke up, noticed Agnes, and turned around, putting her head on Agnes' lap to request to be petted. Feeling jealous, I walked up to the sofa, determined to jump onto it, but I was scared by how high it was and unsure of how high I could jump, and decided against it. Wavering with hesitation, I restlessly stood in front of it, tapping in place, until Agnes' father noticed me.

"Hey little one," he said in a friendly tone. "You can jump on the couch, you know. There's already someone on it."

He waited for me to do so, apparently thinking I was hesitating because I wasn't sure whether or not I was allowed to. After a few seconds only, he understood the height scared me and gently picked me up and put me on his lap. Frozen in a respectful silence, I didn't dare move and simply laid on his lap where he had deposited me, careful not to look him in the eye. Mine leered themselves towards Agnes, both in an effort to make her jealous and to request help, but she was focused on Topa and a hint of jealousy made my heart rush. I was jealous that the ninetales was being petted by Agnes and not me, but did my best to brush off that feeling. Thinking about it, I felt embarrassed by my own reaction. I was obviously more attached to Agnes than I thought.

"She doesn't seem to trust me," Agnes' father said, noticing I was still sitting down and not exactly enjoying being petted. "At least

she's not scared, so that will come."

"She doesn't exactly look comfortable either," Agnes replied. "Maybe I should take her. Topa, would you mind?"

Topa lifted her eyes, acting like she was disappointed, and turned around again, and I was given back to Agnes while Topa put her head on her master's lap. Hiding my undeserved pride, I felt like I had achieved something, making the humans do what I wanted them to do without saying anything. I knew it was stupid of me to feel that way, but I felt proud, and gladly accepted to be put on Agnes' lap.

A maid came by the sofa and waited until Agnes and her father were looking at her to start talking. Once she was sure she had their attention, she announced with a high-pitched and soft voice:

"Excuse me, Sir. Dinner is ready. If you would please come."

"Alright," Agnes' father said, turning the TV off. "Thank you."

The maid bowed and left, walking rapidly as if she were intimidated or scared of doing something wrong by staying there. As everyone was standing up, Topa jumped on the floor and Agnes picked me up. I was mildly annoyed by it, as being carried in someone's arms was not very comfortable and I wanted to be able to walk and jump now that I had relative freedom of movement, but I knew I wasn't allowed to say anything.

Agnes' mother was already at the table. She smiled when she saw us come, but didn't bother petting Topa or me and completely ignored us. As everyone sat down, Agnes deposited me on her lap and kept a hand on my shoulders to indicate me not to move. Were we not supposed to eat? Why was I at the table?

"I found her a name," Agnes announced, excited.

"Oh, that's good!" her father replied. "What name is it?"

"Well, I was thinking, since Topa got her name from..."

"Your father asked what name it was, not how you came up with it," Agnes' mother said, interrupting her daughter.

She sounded annoyed, almost angry. I couldn't help but be very angry myself at that unsupportive woman. I was starting to understand why her odour was so unpleasant. I was willing to bet she was like the typical stepmother, always insulting everything and completely void of any positive feelings.

Agnes sighed. I could smell she was hurt by her mother's attitude and her rude behaviour. She nevertheless decided not to let it show, and abandoned her story simply to answer the question.

"I want to name her Ruby," she said.

I liked that name a lot. It was close to my name as a human, and had a precious feeling to it, which I liked.

"That is a good name," Agnes' mother approved.

She didn't sound genuine. The detachment and almost aggressive tone with which she had made her comment showed that she didn't actually care, and only approved of the name to cut the conversation short.

"Indeed," her father added. "Do you have all the paperwork ready? I can drop it to the pokemon centre tomorrow."

"Not yet, I wanted you to hear the name and see what you thought of it."

"That was not needed," Agnes' mother replied crudely.

Agnes' fist clenched up on my head as she was petting me. In an attempt to make her feel better, I rubbed my head on her stomach, laying down and asking to be petted more, but my little play was ineffective. Unknowingly hurting me, Agnes was firmly grasping the

hair on top of my head. Her hand was shaking like she was about to cry.

"I have to agree with your mother, this time," her father said on a gentle tone, giving his wife murderous eyes. "While we appreciate you wanting our input on it, remember that you took her as your pokemon. You should think of her and of yourself first. As long as you like the name, you should go ahead with it."

"Alright," Agnes said, disappointed. "I'll give you the papers tomorrow before leaving for class."

"Very well. Ah, here."

Maids were bringing the food in. Agnes gently pushed my rear, silently telling me to get on the floor. I jumped and joined Topa, who was waiting for her food, sitting next to two dishes: one brown and one yellow that was slightly bigger. I correctly guessed that the brown one was for me.

The smell of the food Agnes' family got to it made me dizzy. It smelled so good that I had a hard time stopping myself from going there and asking for a piece of it. Instead, one of the maids came up to us and poured a weird mix in our dish. It looked properly disgusting, but had a strangely appealing smell.

"Ninetales, what is this?" I asked before she started eating.

"You are free to call me Topa!" she replied. "This is our meal. It is a mix of eggs, chicken meat, vegetables and a few other things I forgot. It looks weird but it is delicious!"

As if to support her claims, she gulped a mouthful of it, but the presentation of this weird food made me reluctant to try.

"Are we going to eat this every day?"

"Every evening indeed. You will have dry food in the morning. Considering you are recovering from an injury, you might be given a chansey egg too!"

"Ew," I silently commented.

I eventually gave in to hunger and ate the disgusting meal as I could. It turned out that Topa was right and it tasted much better than it looked, but I still felt sad I wouldn't get to eat whatever the humans were eating. I kept peeking at the table, hoping Agnes would notice my desperate attempts at getting her attention and would give me something from her plate, but she was eating in silence and never turned around to look at me.

After everyone was done eating, Agnes' mother went back to her room without a word. Agnes finally turned around and was happy to notice my dish was empty.

"Hey, you've eaten everything? Great!" she said, coming up to me and kneeling to pet me. "What about your name? Do you like it?"

I nodded with enthusiasm.

"Alright then. Ruby it is!"

She gave me a kiss on the forehead and went to her room, probably going to bed. I was surprised that she wanted my input on the name, but felt rather happy about it. If I were a regular pet fox, she probably would never have bothered asking me, which meant she considered me to be at least more than a normal fox.

"Great name!" Topa said, walking by me.

Her belly was round, visibly well filled. I looked at my own and noticed the same amusing lump.

"I like it," I replied with less enthusiasm than I showed to Agnes.

I wasn't sure what to say at that point. Topa just smiled and left the room, probably going outside for her business.

As I watched the enthralling dance of her beautiful march, I abruptly noticed that she had called me "Vulpix" up to this point and had never asked me for a name. Did that mean wild pokemon did not give one another names? Was she simply waiting for Agnes to name me? The realisation that I had just been given a name made me violently sad. I felt like I had just lost something.

"Oh, hey," Agnes' father said to the maid who was cleaning the table. "Rakuen, isn't it?"

"Yes, Sir," the maid replied in a voice I recognized.

It was the same one that came to tell us dinner was ready. She was quite short but had a very generous chest that barely seemed to fit in her black and white french maid uniform, but married the deep black colour of her semi-short hair wonderfully. Standing still, she joined her hands in front of her crotch, still holding the tissue she was cleaning the table with, doing her best to hide a nervous shiver. She looked very young, probably not much older than Agnes.

"I reckon you are aware of Ruby's situation?"

"I am, Sir."

"I have had no time to assign someone to her yet. Topa has a designed maid, but Ruby doesn't. Would you mind asking who's willing to do that?"

I wasn't sure what the designed maid was for, but Rakuen's face seemed to illuminate. She felt a lot more confident when she replied, losing part of her expected composure:

"I would very happily do it, Sir. Please allow me!"

"Sure," he replied, seemingly not surprised by his maid's sudden reaction. "I'll leave Ruby to you, then. You are now responsible for her."

"I'll do my best," Rakuen replied, bowing down as her master left the living room.

While she finished cleaning the table, I turned, looking for Topa, but remembered that she had left a while ago and I was now alone. Unsure of what to do, I just sat where I was, hoping the ninetales would come back and tell me what I was supposed to be doing in the evening.

Rakuen came back, wiping her hands with some big tissue that she then put inside the apron she was wearing on top of her dress. She paused in front of me, visibly excited, but kept her composure and calmly knelt before me.

"Hello," she said in a soft voice.

I stepped back, unsure of how to handle that person, and retreated under the table where the maid could not reach me. My heart was racing, less from fear than from worry. I was hoping I wouldn't have to deal with humans so early after being taken in, as I still had no idea how I was supposed to behave. It hadn't even been a day since I first stepped into this house, and I was already being put in a risky situation.

"Don't be scared!" she said, stretching an arm forward for me to smell from my shelter. "I'm not going to hurt you! I understand you were wild, but you're safe here."

She had a point. I was indeed supposed to be safe in this house, but I wasn't quite ready to interact with humans yet. Following what I remembered seeing in wild animals, I slowly stepped forward and smelled her hand. Although she did smell friendly and had a pleasant odour - in spite of the aggressive smell of detergent still very strong on her fingers, I wasn't sure whether or not to trust her.

She withdrew her hand, visibly sad that I wasn't confident enough to let her touch me. That didn't seem to break her spirits as she was still beaming when she stood up.

"Alright! Let me explain. Since I'm the maid designed to attend you, I'll be the one you should come to if you want or need something. I'll also be responsible for washing you, grooming, and taking care of you in general. I hope we'll be working together for a while, so let's be friends, okay?"

I couldn't stop thinking that that girl was really cute - and she was probably thinking the same about me as I was hiding under the table, protected by the chairs, nodding from my shelter to indicate I had understood her explanation. Although the idea of having someone I could trust and refer to if I needed something was appealing, I only wanted to limit my interactions with humans, at least until I had a better idea of how to behave like a fox so I would not be suspicious to them.

Rakuen muttered something, smiling widely, then left, but I wasn't listening. While there was a good chance I would be able to fool the humans, would I really be able to fool the ninetales? Would it not be better to tell her and hope she would help me directly? Would I be able to learn to use my powers without her guidance? What would happen if I managed to fool her?

I couldn't continue thinking freely, as Topa came back, smelling like grass and water. As I expected, she did go to the gardens, and came back to check up on me.

"What are you doing there?" she asked, amused.

"There was a maid," I poorly explained, unable to exactly tell what was scary about it.

"I am afraid you will have to get used to them. They are all very kind and will not hurt you. As I said before, you will mostly be left alone

until you recover. You will have one maid assigned to you to take care of you."

"Yes, I know, Agnes' father just assigned one to me."

"Just refer to him as Sir," Topa replied, walking around the table to find a way to reach me.

I was amused by her calling Agnes' parents Sir and I assumed Madam. It was cute, in a way, for that was how the maids and butlers referred to them and Topa was probably just doing the same. In a sense, that meant that she acknowledged that the humans were her masters, and I wasn't too happy about that. As a human, I did want my pets to recognise me as their master and obey me, but now that I was on the other end of the relationship, it didn't feel too good of an idea. I didn't like the feeling of belonging to someone and having to obey unconditionally.

Once I was certain no human would come anymore, I crawled out of my shelter and walked up to Topa.

"You will have to get used to the humans," she said, looking at me like she was scolding me. "No one will hurt you here."

I looked away, unsure of what to say. My previous questions came back to me right away. Should I tell her?

"I'm sorry," I eventually said, laying my ears.

"Ah, do not worry, I think I can understand you would be scared of them. Were you not living in the wild before being wounded?"

"Uh... yeah."

That was my assumption, but I didn't know who exactly I was. Considering that "I" was reported to be moving when Agnes found me and the first thing I remembered from this body was waking up in the pokemon centre, it seemed clear to me that I had taken the body

of an already existing vulpix, who probably died in the trade, but I knew nothing of her life before I stole her body. I didn't know how I came to enter it, or what happened to my human one, and it didn't feel like I would ever have answers to those questions. What would I do if she asked more precise questions about my life before the wound that I obviously would not be able to answer?

"You will get used to them," she said, resting her head on top of mine in a gesture I assumed to be a hug. "For now, let us go sleep, shall we? There are a few more explanations to be given."

I sighed and silently agreed. I wasn't really in the mood for any explanations. I had to make a decision, and quickly.

As we exited the room, I was startled by a new array of scents I had not detected before. I realised soon after that several men in a police-like uniform were wandering the halls. Some of them had a pet growlithe walking proudly by their side. Intimidated by that sudden number of humans and especially other pokemon, I tried to hide under Topa's belly. She sat down, waiting patiently for me to get out of my improvised shelter.

"Do not worry," she said, laughing quietly. "They are the night guards, they will not bother us. Their mission is to look after the house and gardens once everyone sleeps. The Trokair family is the richest family in the entire town and that attracts lots of burglars."

"Burglars?" I replied, unhappy with the idea.

"Yes. Dishonest people who try to break into the house and steal what is in here."

"Huh..." I muttered, very unhappy with the idea. "Is that dangerous?"

"Rarely. The vast majority of people who try it are caught by the guards. If one of them successfully breaks into the house, or if the guards struggle with them, it is then my duty to catch the intruder."

"That sounds dangerous," I whispered, extremely unhappy with the idea. "Are you sure it's not dangerous?"

"It is not," she giggled, obviously confident. "No one has broken into the house so far, at least that I remember. You are safe here."

"Will I be asked to help you with that?" I inquired, pale.

"Not for now, I think, but you will probably be asked to once you are better. If something happens until then, I will ask you to hide and not come out. I do not want you to risk being wounded."

She started walking again, but I wasn't following her. It would probably take a month or so for my wound to heal, which meant I had a month to learn to use my powers and to learn at least basic fighting, and that was assuming I was not asked anything until then. I caught myself thinking that it would have been better for me to be released in the wild, where I could perhaps have learnt on my own, but Topa's gentle and supportive attitude made me hope I was wrong. I eventually agreed to stand up and we walked up to the stairs, which stopped us again.

"Is something the matter?"

I didn't dare answer. The steps of the stairs were about half as tall as me, and I had no idea how to go about them. Topa would probably be able to walk normally, but they were too tall for me.

"Have you never seen stairs before?" Topa asked, obviously surprised.

I sighed, sitting down and not daring looking at her.

"Topa, we... There's something I need to tell you."

She seemed to be caught off by my reaction, not expecting me to be so gloomy and acting so serious all of a sudden.

"Very well," she said, losing her kind tone for a more perplex one.
"For the stairs, you can just jump on them. They are large enough for you to land safely."

She patiently walked behind me as I was clumsily jumping from step to step, making sure I was not falling, then led me to her room after we reached the top, congratulating me with a warm smile. My heart was beating faster as we finished climbing the stairs, entered the hallways, entered the room, then laid on our respective pillow. There was a very tense and awkward silence for a few minutes, only interrupted by my irregular nervous heartbeat.

"Are you alright?" Topa asked, worried.

"Yeah... I just..."

I didn't know where to start. How was I supposed to tell her? What was I supposed to say? Was it even a good idea to say anything?

"There was something you wanted to tell me," she said, trying to push me. "Is it important?"

"Well... yes."

"You should tell me, then. I do not know what makes you so scared, but I will not yell at you or eat you or do anything. You are part of my family now. You can trust me."

This sounded so much like what my parents told me when they thought I kept secrets from them that I started tearing up and silently crying. Topa came up to me and laid down around me, making a bed of her tails that I rested on, then started licking the hair at the top of my head to try to calm me down. Although her motherly attitude was reassuring, I felt uncomfortable with her treating me like a fox kit. I pushed myself away from her, then stood up as she looked at me, puzzled.

"Are you sure you are alright?" she insisted.

Was I?

She didn't insist in trying to calm me down and was simply laying down on my pillow, waiting patiently for me to say what I wanted to say.

I took a deep breath and sat down. It was too late to back away now, and I was probably doing the right thing, but it felt so difficult... I didn't know how she was going to react. I had no clue if she would even believe me.

"I..."

What was I going to say? How would I even bring the subject? It was clear for Topa that I was a vulpix and I was trying to break that. Was it really a good idea to tell her?

"Did you not notice... something strange about me?"

"Not really," she replied, squinting towards the floor in uncertainty. "Did you not say you were wild before being brought in? If you think your behaviour is strange, it might be because of it."

"No... I actually... I don't know if I was wild or not."

"You do not know? That sounds worrisome. Did you forget?"

"No!" I almost shouted, surprising both Topa and myself. "I... I have no idea what happened to me before the pokemon centre. I mean..."

I took a break, gathering my spirits and trying to spit out the words. Topa was staring at me, deeply worried, but did not say anything.

"I'm... I'm not a vulpix," I said. "I'm a human."

Chapter 6

A pressing silence followed, disturbed only by the echo my accelerated heartbeat.

"I... am not sure I understand," she eventually said, puzzled.

"I'm not a vulpix," I repeated. "I'm a human."

She sat down from her laying position, her eyes locked on me in an intense expression of focus. "You are a vulpix. At least... from what I can tell."

"I'm not a vulpix!" I repeated again, almost shouting. My entire body tensed up, and I closed my eyes. "I'm... I'm a human in a vulpix's body!"

Topa's eyes widened, her muzzle left slightly ajar. As her eyes lost contact with me, she laid down again, front legs crossed, staring at the tip of her paws

I felt like my heart was going to explode. My feeble attempts at controlling my breaths were not helping. The incessant thumping of my disorganised heartbeat was so loud in my ears that I felt like I was going to stop breathing at any point and suffocate from stress alone. Besides my racing heartbeat, my sensitive ears also caught wind of Topa's own accelerating pulse. She was clearly not expecting this kind of revelation.

I caught myself wanting to snatch my pillow back from under her. I just wanted to go to bed, sleep, and wake up. And when I woke up, I would be a human again, and none of this would have happened.

Topa rested her head on her crossed legs and sighed deeply. She only transiently leered at me before her gaze lost itself upon her pretty paws, her palpitating eyes partly peering at me as she remained deep in thought.

"Alright."

She sat up, sighing again, her heartbeat having returned to a normal pace.

"I believe you," she said.

Before I could process what she had said, I felt like my heart melted and my whole life crumbled before me. I was about ready to cry. When I realized what she actually said, shock made me momentarily forget my anxiety.

"What?" I coughed. "Is that it?"

"It is very hard for me to believe," she conceded, "but everything tells me you are actually not lying."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you looked at yourself? It looks like you are about to break. Please calm down. Take some time to breathe, lay down, but please be less nervous. Also, we have only met this morning, and you are making yourself this bad to tell me something that is obviously extremely important to you. There is no way you are not telling the truth. It looks to me like you have been debating this for a long time and were scared of my reaction."

I didn't realize my muzzle was open until my tongue started feeling dry. I didn't expect this level of insight from a fox, even a nine-tailed firebreathing one, and even less to be read so easily. I felt like I was talking to another human being and it made me extremely uncomfortable. Partially relieved, I managed to calm my heart down a bit, but it was still beating dangerously fast to the point of making me short of breath.

With another sigh, Topa stood up, grabbed my pillow with her teeth and dragged it to me, then went to her own pillow and laid on it.

"I believe we have much to talk about," she said, going back to her naturally kind tone. "If you have anything in mind, please tell me. I will do what I can to help you."

I sat on my own pillow, still uncomfortable with the whole situation.

"Well... Yeah, I was scared of your reaction. I thought you would... kick me out or eat me or... something."

"Whether or not you stay is not for me to decide," she said, her head dropping slightly as she noticed I was keeping myself at a distance from her. "As I said before, you are part of the family, and I will support you no matter what."

"What if the humans don't support me? What if they kick me out?"

Topa opened her muzzle to say something, but refrained, remaining silent for a few seconds.

"I would insist to keep you. I cannot just let you go out in the wild, especially not if you are a human. Unfortunately, the decision does not rest with me. Is that what you were worried about? Being kicked out?"

I silently nodded, doing my best to hold my tears back.

"You did assume I would believe you," Topa noticed, to my biggest surprise. "My reaction was not your biggest worry, was it? You are scared of humans finding out."

I nodded again.

"I don't know what they're going to do if they find out," I explained. "Considering... your reaction... I assume humans turning into pokemon is not something that is supposed to happen. So... I'd probably be treated either as some freak, or some lab rat to study. I... I don't want to be treated like that."

"How would you rather be treated?" Topa asked. "As a human or as a vulpix?"

I sighed, digging my head into my paws, the grown fur reminding me that there would never be human fingers there anymore. Tears formed in my eyes as I stretched one forward, spreading the tiny fingers as I could, and discovering that I could partially retract my unkempt claws.

"This isn't a hand," I said. "I can't be treated as a human. Not anymore."

"It would be difficult for me not to treat you as a vulpix," Topa admitted. "You want to keep this from the humans and from other pokemon, do you not?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "I hoped you... you'd show me... how to be a fox and..."

I choked. Holding my tears back had made my throat so tense it had become painful, and I knew I wouldn't keep them in much longer. Topa's worried staring indicated that she could feel it, but had the unexpected respect to keep away from me as I myself had put distance between us. She was waiting for me to come to her.

"How to use my powers and all. I'm..."

I wasn't too sure what to say at this point.

"I will," Topa promised. "You have been doing a marvellous job at behaving like a vulpix would. You even fooled me. I do not think much effort will be needed on that, but learning to use your powers will take time."

I nodded. As long as I could make people think I was a normal vulpix, I would probably be safe. For some time...

"I just have one question," Topa said, hesitating. "Do you know... how you turned into a vulpix?"

"No," I replied, shaking my head. "I... The last thing I remember from when I was a human is going to bed. And then... I woke up in this body, in the emergency room in the hosp... pokemon centre. I just..."

My whole body was shaken by a disgusting spasm. It was hard for me to breathe for a few seconds, until my eyes started watering and I couldn't refrain from crying anymore. Finally breaking, I laid on my belly, ignoring the pain and numbness, and put my paws on my muzzle, trying to cover my eyes. Topa stood silently, watching me cry, until she decided to walk up to me and nest around me, covering me with her tails.

"I think we should sleep now," she said with a motherly tone. "That is enough for tonight. We can talk anytime you need it. For now, just rest."

She put her head on her front paws again, pushing it against mine in an effort to cuddle. Although it didn't stop me from crying, being close to her that way made me feel better, and I managed to fall into a fragile, tormented slumber.

I woke up early in the morning, but as Topa was still sleeping, I remained immobile for a long time until she woke up. I was trying to process what had happened the short and dense day before. Although I felt relieved that I had finally left the pokemon centre, where I felt restricted and constantly watched, the size of this house made me dizzy, and I was still being restricted and constantly watched, just in a different way. The wealth of this family was staggering. When I was human, I would never have dreamt of living in such a palace. Yet, here I was, the little fox I had become, lost in a maze of halls, restricted yet again by a set of rules I had never agreed to follow. Stuck as a pet.

I felt out of place. I felt so strongly like a parasite that it made me violently distressed. Topa said she believed my story, but I had a

hard time trusting her on that. There was no way she did. She was being supportive, which I couldn't complain about, but that was because that was expected of her. I would get to see her true colours a few hours after she woke up. I would know what exactly she was going to do with me.

She eventually woke up, slightly before Rakuen stepped quietly in the room and switched the light on.

"Ruby, Topa, it's time for you to eat," she said.

Without a hint of hesitation, Topa stood up, stretched, then went down the stairs as if she had been awake for several hours although she had only just woken up. I was still very sleepy and my approximate movements made it obvious. Rakuen slowly approached me, thinking I was still afraid of her, and extended an arm to see if I would let her touch me. As she was the maid assigned to me, I was likely to spend a lot of time with her, possibly even more than Agnes, and I had no choice but to trust her. Still weary, I stood and slowly walked to her to deposit my head in her head, silently requesting to be petted. Rakuen's face was instantly lit with a bright smile and she did not refrain from stroking my head and scratching behind my ears. I felt guilty for accepting this kind of display of affection, considering I never wanted to be a fox, but I needed to maintain an impression. Had Topa asked me, I would not have admitted that it felt good and that I ended up asking for more. Feeling that way made me feel guilty, as if I were enjoying this body and these new relationships while not supposed to. Rakuen only petted me for a short time, then lifted me to carry me to the living room, where Topa and I had a small breakfast.

Shortly after we were finished with our meal, the faint noise of two doors opening reached us from downstairs. Topa rushed to it and I was left alone next to the empty dishes as the maids were preparing the table for breakfast. I realized that the doors I heard were the bedroom doors when Agnes and her parents walked into the room. Sir and Madam were already fully dressed in the formal attire I had met them in the day before and looked concerned even though their

day had not started yet. Agnes was not yet dressed and was wearing some sort of oversized grey pyjamas, her hair being surprisingly neat in spite of being visibly uncombed. Suddenly self-conscious, I tried to turn around to see if my body was a mess too, but my belly protested with a surge of pain and I didn't try again.

"You shouldn't move like that," Agnes said, kneeling to pet me. "Not until you're fully healed."

She then greeted her parents, noticing them a bit late although she probably walked with them for a moment, then the maids and butlers as they came by to give her her breakfast. Sir took some time to greet me, but Madam completely ignored me and sat at the table.

"Do you want me to groom you?" Topa asked.

I jolted, not realizing she had come back.

"What?"

"Groom you. Since we are currently in summer, your fur is fairly short, but it still requires grooming or it will tangle and look bad. The maid assigned to you should groom you with a brush after the humans finish their breakfast, I think, but if she does not, can I?"

I remained silent for a few seconds, before denying with an abrupt and involuntarily rude "no". Enthusiasm vanished from Topa's eyes as she became upset by my rude rebuttal, but she didn't insist, and opted to lay by a sofa near the TV instead. I left the room instead of joining her, going to the stairs, happy to notice no one was around to witness my attempts at learning to climb them more comfortably. I took time to try to hop on the steps as naturally as I could, but I had the feeling my movement was off, although it didn't bother me too much - it could be excused by the wound I had recently suffered. Once at the top of the stairs, I realised something: I needed to go back down, but I didn't even dare go down one step. Walking down the stairs while on all four was close to terrifying. I didn't insist,

scared of being seen hesitating to do that, which I assumed would be suspicious, and wandered around the house.

I realised that there was one part of the house Topa had not shown me, apart from the third floor where maids and butlers lived. It was the left wing of the second floor. Scanning around me to make sure I wouldn't be seen, I sneakily walked to that undiscovered area, excited like an explorer setting foot on a new land. It looked very much like the left wing of the first floor, but all doors were closed. The only difference was that the end of the corridor was closed off by a massive, cold metallic door, very different from the beautifully decorated wooden door that closed the access to the library a floor below. Intrigued, I slowly walked towards it like a cat sneaks on its prey, crouching as if that made me any less visible. Once near the door, I jumped out of my imaginary shelter, took a few steps forward, and gently touched the obstacle with my muzzle.

I instantly sneezed and walked backwards a few steps, confused, senses I didn't know I had giving me all sorts of warnings I didn't understand. Something was off with this door. Going back to it, I sniffed at it intently.

It had no odour. I was smelling it as hard as I could, but I couldn't smell anything, not even anyone else's scent or my own. The maids were obviously cleaning the door, but there was no trace of it. No human odour, no odour of cleaning products, no odour of Topa. It was completely scentless. Even death had an odour, and this door didn't.

"Ruby?" I heard a voice behind me shout.

I jolted so much, scared out of my spine while focused on this weird door, that I jumped into the air and fell on the ground, before turning around, my fur standing on its end and my tails spreading behind me as I arched my back in an effort to look more impressive. I quickly calmed down when I realized I was facing Topa.

"Ruby, what are you doing here?"

She sounded... worried. Almost panicked. And somewhat angry.

She ran to me from the main hall, grabbed me by the back of my neck, and carried me into her room, dropping me onto my pillow.

"What did I do?" I whined, having the strong feeling I was being punished.

"Do not go there!" she replied, almost yelling at me. "That wing is forbidden. There is a reason why I did not show it to you!"

I felt unbearably sad. I was being lectured for being curious. I had no idea that wing was forbidden. How could I have known?

"Topa, what's behind that door?"

"I do not know," she replied more calmly. "Whatever is behind it, access is strictly forbidden to everyone. Not even Sir or Madam go in there."

"It has no smell," I said, whining again.

"I know."

She almost whispered that. It was obviously not normal. I tried to push for information, but Topa ignored me and tried to change the subject.

"Agnes will leave for school very soon. After she has left, we have a lot more talking to do."

"Talking?"

I knew what she was talking about, but I felt like I wanted to hear it from her, or have a confirmation that she did believe me.

"You said you are a human," she whispered, "and that means I have to explain a lot of things to you. Similarly, there are a few questions I

want to ask you. However, we need to wait until Agnes and her parents left."

"So you do believe me?"

"Did I not say so already? I do. I have been thinking about this and I agree with you in thinking we need to keep this a secret from humans and other pokemon alike. I apologize for this, but I will treat you as a vulpix, even if you do not want me to."

"I... understand. I think. I mean... I'm a vulpix, right? Even if... I'm not. Er... I'm not making any sense."

I took some time to think about what I was going to say to try to word it as best I could.

"I don't identify as a vulpix," I eventually said, "but I am one. I mean... I can't deny that. So... it's best for me to accept it and live my life as a vulpix."

"Indeed," Topa agreed, visibly glad I was thinking clearly enough to realize that. "I hope you will feel better in the future. As I said before, you are doing a very good job at being a vulpix, and..."

Topa was interrupted by Agnes, who came in the room to say goodbye for the day. While she only petted Topa a bit, she lifted me and hugged me tightly before leaving.

"What was that for?" I asked.

"Pardon?"

"Why did she bother hugging me and not you?"

"She likes you! You are also still recovering, so it cannot hurt you to be shown affection, can it?"

"I... I guess..."

I remained silent for a while. Did Agnes actually like me? How would she react if she knew?

"Alright," Topa said, interrupting my thoughts. "Let us talk. Would you mind coming?"

She stood up, exiting the room and waiting for me to follow her. When we got to the stairs, I froze.

"I can't go down the stairs," I simply said, embarrassed.

"It is easy!" Topa replied. "You can just walk normally through them."

"It's scary."

I put both of my front paws on the step below me, then instantly backed off. My rear was much too high above my head for me to even try. I felt like I was going to roll over and fall.

"I can't," I said, defeated.

Topa grabbed the excess skin on my neck to carry me down, causing my tails to immediately cover my wounded belly, and me to feel guilty and sad, as if I were being punished. She then led me to the pokemon training room. The door was closed, but there was a cat door on it that allowed us to go in without having to ask someone to open the room for us. As soon as we walked in, the ceiling lights switched on.

"I like this," Topa said. "The lights are switched on as soon as someone walks in, and off when they leave. Is it not funny? It feels like magic."

"Actually... It's dead simple. There's just a motion detector somewhere. If we remain immobile for a while, the lights will turn off."

As I suggested, we waited for a minute or so without moving, and the room became very dark, even for my new eyes. Topa sighed.

"You were right," she said, visibly disappointed.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't want to ruin it for you."

"That is fine! If anything, I find this more interesting. How does the motion detector work? How does it tell the lights to switch on?"

"I'm... not sure. That's not something I learnt."

"Oh. Then it still has a bit of magic in it!"

I found it extremely cute, and a bit sad, how Topa considered those to be magic. At the same time, I couldn't help but feel sad. I wouldn't get to learn many new things anymore.

"Alright, I have quite a few explanations to give, now," Topa said, sitting in the centre of the room. "Before I start with how our powers work, do you have any questions?"

I did, but I wasn't sure whether to ask them now or later. I was very excited to learn to use my powers, but I had a chance to ask whatever I wanted now. If I didn't, would I forget?

"Yeah," I decided. "Hum... Pokemon can talk to one another, right? I mean... Even outside of the same species."

"Oh," Topa coughed, as if she had just remembered something important. "Maybe I should talk about pokemon in general first. Well, yes, pokemon have a universal language. Humans cannot understand it, but most pokemon understand human language."

"Are all pokemon... As intelligent as you?"

"What do you mean?"

I hesitated, unsure of how to answer without sounding condescending.

"I'm sorry if I sound arrogant or condescending, but... You understand the concept of politeness. You are able to carry on complex reasonings, form hypothesis, test them, draw conclusions... You sound as intelligent as a human to me. Animals... in my world, animals were nowhere this intelligent."

"Oh. Well, thank you. I do not know if pokemon are more or less intelligent than humans, but the vast majority is capable of everything you listed. The vulpix tree is average, I would say. There are pokemon that are extremely intelligent, and others that are... Like animals in your world, I suppose."

"Are there normal animals here too?"

"Normal? Are pokemon not normal?"

"Well... not for me. I'm sorry."

"I was kidding!" Topa smiled. "Yes, there are animals that are not pokemon, although pokemon are animals too. The ones that are called pokemon are the ones that can use powers. Most look like other animals, actually. You and I both are foxes, for example."

"Can we... talk to them?"

"No, they do not share our language. You could probably communicate to some extent by growling or yelping, but that is all you can do."

I failed to hide my disappointment as I let out a deep sigh. I would very much have loved to talk to a cat or a fox, but I obviously couldn't.

"What kind of... er... How do animals react to pokemon?"

Topa took some time to think about the answer.

"Animals are much friendlier to pokemon than humans, but... pokemon are still predators to some of them. For example, if you go

in the gardens, you are allowed to hunt and kill rabbits, squirrels, or birds. If you kill a rabbit, bring it to the kitchen, they will be happy to have a fresh rabbit to eat! If it is not edible, they will give it back to you or use it for our dishes."

"Hunting..."

I grimaced. The idea was appalling.

"You do not have to hunt. I am honestly a terrible hunter, so I would have a very hard time teaching you. I used to play with birds and squirrels when I was a vulpox, so I do not know how to hunt them and I would not want to kill any."

"I'm not sure I want to kill anything."

"You will probably never have to," Topa said. "I am twelve years old now, and I never killed anything."

"Twelve? Does that mean..."

"I was born the same day as Melissa," Topa replied, thinking that was what I had in mind. "I am actually Melissa's pokémon. Neither Sir nor Madam own one. Agnes used not to, but now... she does!"

"You were born the same day as Melissa? But... How long can... er... ninetails live?"

"Oh, I will outlive Melissa, her children, her children's children, and many more. Ninetails can live outrageously long lives."

"What about... what about me?"

"If you do not evolve, you will live a hundred years or so. You will probably outlast Agnes!"

I felt dizzy. One of my main worries after I turned into a fox was to see my life violently shortened to a dozen years, but I was just

learning that it had actually been extended. And if I were to evolve... I'd live even more. If I evolved...

"Are you alright?" Topa asked, noticing I was silent.

"I was thinking," I replied, deciding not to talk about future events for now. "Say, how did you get your name?"

"Topa? Melissa gave me my name... Somewhat. Melissa obviously could not give me a name, so Agnes got to choose it. She was 10 at the time, and obsessed with gem stones. Since my fur was yellow, she decided to call me Topaze. However, the 'ze' sound was too difficult for Melissa to pronounce at the time and she kept saying 'Topa', and that is how it became my name."

I couldn't help but find it all adorable. That also explained why I was called Ruby, as my fur was red - it looked like Agnes did not get over her gemstone obsession.

"Wait, what?" I asked with a sudden realization. "Your fur was yellow?"

"Yes. Vulpix are born with yellow fur and only one tail. The fur becomes a reddish brown, like yours, as they age. The tail splits and becomes orange, too. For some vulpix, their fur never changes its colours and remains yellow. Only the tail takes a small orange tint. Those are called 'shiny' by humans, but it is just a colour alteration."

So that was what shiny pokemon were - at least shiny vulpix.

"What about ninetales?"

"Pardon?"

"What colour is a shiny ninetales?"

"Their fur is grey with a blue tint. The tip of their tails is blue, too."

Topa extended one of her tails to me to compare its colour to the colour of mine.

"See, our tails are the same colour. When a shiny vulpix evolves, its fur changes colours completely."

"Are there other colours? Is yellow the only possible alteration?"

"Well, I have heard of black or white vulpix, but I have never seen them. I assume they are rare."

"Albinism and melanism," I said, mostly to myself.

"Pardon?"

"That's what it's called when an animal's fur is white or black. Albinism is white, melanism is black. It's a rare genetic mutation."

"Genetic?"

"Huh... I don't want to explain."

"Oh."

Topa sounded disappointed not to get an explanation, but fascinated at the same time.

"What I mean is..." I started, unsure of what to say. "Foxes... I mean, normal foxes, they have a lot of different colours, cats too, so I thought vulpix would be the same."

"Not that I know of!" Topa replied with enthusiasm. "The only colour changes I know are black, white, and shiny. The colours for a shiny pokémon change with its species, as you probably guessed."

"I... already knew that."

"You knew?"

"You probably won't believe me, but... There is a series of pokemon games in my world. And so far... Everything has been very accurate. There's ninetales, vulpix, I've seen a houndour, growlithe, nurse Joy... I'm starting to think I'm actually in the pokemon world from the games."

Topa remained silent for a while. The lights switched off at some point, and she stood up and stretched to switch them back on.

"That is quite crazy," she said. "It actually is good for us. It means that you probably know a lot more than I thought! I feel like it will be easier for you to get used to this world with that. Is that not a good thing?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I can't just assume everything is the same."

"You have a point," Topa conceded. "Alright, then. How about I explain to you how your powers work? You will need them, and I think you have been waiting for this for a long while."

Chapter 7

Topa was right. I had been waiting for this.

It was one of my first thoughts after I realized I was a vulpix, but I would probably not go as far as calling it "a long while". The idea I would turn into a vulpix never crossed my mind. I had been a pokemon for only a week, and although I was very eager to learn how to breathe fire, I was also scared of it.

"You have two different kinds of powers," Topa said. "The first is the one I will teach you first: breathing fire. Be cautious in your use of this power, for you will be breathing actual fire and could easily set the house ablaze should you breathe a flame in the wrong place."

She read my mind. So I was able to use actual fire? That sounded extremely dangerous - and excitingly powerful.

"So... I could kill someone?" I asked, my muzzle contracting in a hideous grimace.

"Very easily! You are obviously not allowed to, and I doubt you will reach any situation where you might in your future job."

"My future job? What? I thought I was just a pet. What's that job you're talking about?"

"You did not know?" Topa asked, genuinely surprised. "I imagined it would be one of the first things Agnes told you when you were released from the pokemon centre."

"She didn't tell me anything. I don't know what I'm doing here, why I was adopted by this family, why I was wounded, or..."

I couldn't explain the sudden contraction that shut my throat down and prevented from finishing my sentence. It felt like my tongue collapsed into my throat, making me shake and my vision blur.

"How you became a vulpix," Topa finished.

She walked to me and put her head on top of mine in an effort to soothe me with a cuddle, and waited until I looked up to resume her explanation.

"Well, I suppose I will start with that, then. Agnes is currently in training to be part of the police."

I sat down. Was that why she rescued me? I was going to be... just a police dog?

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

Trying to chase the thought away, I stood up and took a few steps circling the ninetales. I didn't want to think about it. I had to wait how it was, then see how much I liked the idea. I didn't have a choice anyway.

"So I assume you learnt the laws from Agnes?"

"Correct. The laws are rather complex and I did not understand all of them, but a short summary is you are not allowed to kill under any circumstances."

"That sounds logical, at least."

"However, there are regulations regarding injuring someone," she added. "If you are attacked, you are allowed to defend yourself. If you injure the human that attacked you, you will not be punished, as long as the injury is not permanent. If you are attacked by another pokemon..."

She paused for a second.

"You can fight to the death. Pokemon injuring or killing other pokemon or animals is generally not punished. If the pokemon

belonged to a trainer, the police will investigate and punish the trainer responsible for the event."

"So... pokemon lives are less important than human lives?" I asked.

"It seems so. If one day I decide go to the forest behind the manor and kill every animal I find, no one will do anything to stop me."

"That's..."

I couldn't finish my sentence. I was already aware that most humans considered animals to be inferior and that animal life had less value than human life, but now that I was on the inferior end of the spectrum, it sounded extremely wrong to me.

I was inferior. A strong burst of despair shook me as I sat down, the realisation of how bad my situation truly was hitting me as abruptly as I had woken up. I was considered inferior, but I was a human.

"Hey," Topa said, poking me with her muzzle. "You look upset. Did I say something wrong?"

"No," I replied, trying to explain. "It's just that... as a human, I considered animals to be less intelligent than me, and I considered them inferior to me... Whatever that means. But now... now I'm not a human... and I'm inferior."

"You are inferior to no one," Topa replied calmly. "That is what some humans think. It does not mean it is true. We are all the same here in this world. What a group of creatures think cannot change that."

Her surprisingly deep thinking and sharp reasoning caught me off guard. Once again, I felt like I was talking to another human, and it made me uncomfortable.

"So... What are the punishments for breaking the laws?"

Topa remained silent for a few minutes, her head pointing at the floor as she was trying to remember.

"If you injure a human and you were not being attacked, you will be taken to a special place with cages. There are cages for humans too."

"A prison," I replied. "That's called a prison."

"A prison," Topa repeated. "Yes. You are locked up for months, or years, and in general there will be someone in charge of getting you back on track. You are supposed to obey your human blindly."

"So if Agnes orders me to injure someone, I get punished? That doesn't sound fair."

"Why not?" Topa asked, surprised. "Agnes only gave the order. You followed it. At the end of the day, you are the one who injured the person, not Agnes."

I couldn't agree with her reasoning, but it was valid.

"And... if I kill a human?"

"You die," Topa replied instantly. "You will be taken away by the police and killed. You can also be killed if you yourself kill another pokemon that did not attack you."

So that was it. My life now was... inferior. On top of that, if I did what was expected of me as a pet, I could possibly die although I did nothing wrong. That wasn't the kind of life I expected as a pet - especially not as a pet.

"I don't want to be a pet," I pouted.

"You have no choice in the matter," Topa replied, coming to me to hug me. "You are Agnes' pet. She is a good person, so you will not kill or injure anyone. Besides, you are still recovering from a serious wound yourself. Even if something happened, Agnes would protect you. And so would I."

"Isn't my role as a pet to protect her? Not the other way around?"

"You protect and look after each other," Topa replied. "There is much more to being a pet than obeying orders and cuddling when asked to."

I remained silent, thinking about my own relations to my pets, an unknown form of guilt constricting my throat as I realised I had been doing everything wrong this whole time. I considered my pets less intelligent, and I only expected them to obey me. I never considered the pet-master relationship as anything but a superior-inferior kind of relationship, but Topa looked at it the way I looked at romantic relationships.

Understanding that I was going into negative thoughts again, Topa poked me with a smile.

"Enough explaining for today, is it not? How about learning to breathe fire? That was originally what we came here for."

I wasn't too excited about it anymore. The idea of being considered inferior by the person who saved my life and probably the person I would grow to love most was depressing. Topa was visibly doing her best to lift my mood, but her positivity could not pierce the veil of my anxiety.

"Ruby," she eventually said, sitting down very seriously in front of me. "What are you thinking about? You look very sad."

I was unsure whether to tell her or not, but realizing she would be my only confidant, I decided to be honest:

"It's just that... When I was human, I had pets and... I considered them inferior to me. I didn't even think love was possible between a human and a pet, at least not the kind of love you have towards your family. And now... now I'm on the other end of the relationship and I am inferior."

I felt ashamed of saying it and admitting that I was just another arrogant human. For a second, I thought the reason why I became a

vulpix was to teach me a lesson about human-animal relationships, but I quickly got rid of that stupid idea.

"You are not inferior," Topa repeated. I hadn't realised that I had said almost exactly the same thing a few minutes prior, but she had the patience not to point it out. "Humans may think you are, like you seem to have been considering your pets inferior, but you are not. We are all the same here. A person and an animal or a pokemon can develop bonds as strong as any."

"I never considered my pets to be part of my family... I saw them as friends." I choked. "Just friends. I'm... I'm ashamed. And sad. Maybe I hurt them by not giving them enough love and I never realized... and now I'm the pet and..."

I didn't know what else to say. The guilt was becoming difficult to handle, and memories of how much my pets loved me came back not as happy times, but to fuel the shame I had developed over not treating them properly.

"If Agnes treated you the way you treated your pets, would you be happy?"

"Definitely," I answered instantly.

"Then you have nothing to worry about. You are a good pokemon. Well... You were a good person. Why would that have changed now that you are a pokemon?"

"I don't know," I replied, gloomy. "Can we even compare my human behaviour to... to now?"

"Would making such comparison bring you anything positive?"

"I don't think so," I answered, thinking for a moment.

"Then let us not do it. Come on, stand up. This is crucial for you to learn. You are expected to know how to breathe fire, and you being

unable to would be suspicious. They might blame the wound, which gives us some time to have you learn, but we need to make sure that you are ready when you are done recovering."

She was right. Doing my best not to let my feelings get the better of me, I stood up with as much resolve as I could muster. This was extremely important, and although I had lost the energy and excitement I originally had at the idea of breathing fire, I was still very eager to learn.

"I am not sure how to explain," Topa admitted after several minutes of silence. "Young vulpix learn this very fast, with or without their parents. I never thought I would have to explain how to breathe fire one day."

"Sorry," I said, blushing and turning my head away.

"What are you apologizing for? You did not do anything wrong."

"I don't know, I just..." I hesitated. "I feel like a burden to you now. If at least I was a real vulpix..."

"You are a real vulpix," Topa insisted. "Look at your paws, your tails, your fur. You are a vulpix and you have this power inside of you. You only need to learn how to use it."

"My mind is not the mind of a vulpix... I'm a human."

"Then let the vulpix part of you teach the human part of you."

That sounded extremely weird, but it got me thinking. Was there a vulpix part of me at all? Was the vulpix whose body I stole somewhere in my brain with me? Would I be able to call her for help or information?

Aware of how ridiculous I probably looked, I sat down, muzzle towards the floor, and tried to imagine what a vulpix looked like in this world, as I had not had a chance to see one yet. I couldn't use

the mirror above the sink because it was too high for me to reach, and of all the other pokemon I had seen, none was like me - even Topa was very different from what I likely looked like as she was evolved. After a few minutes of intense thinking, I gave up and decided to wait until I found a mirror - or Agnes showed my reflection to me like I had to my cats.

"Let us begin, shall we?" Topa asked as I stood up.

"Okay."

"You are new to this body, so you might not know much about it. Focus on your chest. Do you feel it?"

I closed my eyes, trying to focus on what was on my chest. After a few seconds, I understood that Topa meant I should focus on what I felt in my chest - there was something inside, somewhere around the heart. It was warm and crackling like a campfire.

"I can," I said, opening my eyes again.

"This is where your fire comes from," Topa explained. "Humans think that there is a flame burning in our bodies, and that it disappears when we die, but they are wrong. This is simply the source of your powers. Together with your winter coat, it enables you to still feel comfortable even in extremely cold temperatures. When winter comes, Agnes will want you to stay with her as much as possible, because you have this warmth she can use to keep herself in a comfortable temperature range."

I remained silent a few more seconds, enjoying the warmth coming from my chest, trying and failing to locate it precisely. It felt like it was somewhere in my ribcage, roughly located around the heart, but I could feel its effect to the tip of my paws and tails, like a ball of fire that was enveloping my heart and projecting its protective heat to my entire body.

"This is... strangely comforting," I said, enjoying the feeling and wondering how I had not felt it before.

"It is! The warmer it is, the better you are. Humans call it the inner flame. When you are sick, its power diminishes and you are more vulnerable. Naturally, when a vulpix dies, their inner flame dies with them."

"So... that's it? That's where my powers come from?"

"Your real flames, yes."

"Real? You mean there are flames that aren't?"

"Oh. I am sorry, I forgot to explain that. Yes, you have two kinds of powers. The real ones, like our fire, are actual fire, or whatever element they are. You can set something ablaze with it. Light the chimney. And... kill someone."

"They are real flames? Then... pokemon fights..."

"Those are your second kind of power," she continued. "Those are... not real. They do not set things on fire. You cannot drink that water. They are special."

"Not real? How can something not be real?"

"Those powers only interact with creatures," Topa said. "So... if I use them on you, you will feel pain, but I could try my hardest to set a leaf on fire with it, I would fail."

"So they just... cause pain, right? They are the ones used for battles?"

"Most of the time, yes. Of course, sometimes, two pokemon end up fighting to kill each other. And then... They use their real powers."

The idea of setting another animal on fire made me abruptly anxious. I wasn't sure I wanted to try pokemon battling anymore.

"Humans have called those 'unpowers' and have classified them in a certain number of different types. For example, for us, we can use unfire. There are eighteen different types. Unnormal, unfire, unwater, unelectric, ungrass, unice, unfighting, unpoison, unground, unflying, unpsychic, unbug, unrock, unghost, undragon, undark, unsteel and unfairy."

This gave me at least a bit of information - it meant that whatever world I lived in was probably at least past the pokemon X and pokemon Y games, due to the presence of the fairy type.

"How do I use those?" I asked.

"It is difficult to learn. Unlike your inner fire, you have nothing to directly feel them. Human research on the subject is not very advanced. They have detected that we use different kinds of energy and have named them as I listed before. They also discovered that a pokemon's body is surrounded by up to two of those energies. This led to attributing a type to each pokemon, depending on what energies their aura is made of. You and I are pure unfire type."

"So... that means there is a matchup chart, right?"

"Correct!" Topa replied, excited that I was actively learning. "All pokemon know it, and humans seem to have figured it out too."

"So... what happens during a fight?"

"With unpowers, the fight lasts until someone's aura is depleted. In general, having your aura depleted is exhausting and leads to fainting."

I shivered. I wasn't quite ready for pain - especially not if I could avoid it. Pokemon battles sounded worse as I learnt more about them.

"Older pokemon, or pokemon with more experience in battle, have thicker auras and can withstand more moves. When you are hit with

a move, it destroys part of your aura and that is what causes pain."

"Aura?"

"Yes. The aura is the energy, or energies, that surround your body. You produce it constantly but not consciously. It is that aura that you use for moves. As you said, there is a matchup chart, which means some unpowers are either effective or not effective against others. Some are even completely useless against specific ones. For example, as an unfire type, you will be vulnerable against unwater moves, and your own moves will be particularly effective against ungrass type pokemon."

"How do I recover it?"

"Your body regenerates it over time. If you are not using it, the excess aura simply dissipates and is useless."

It made little sense to me that something like that was possible. I spent several minutes debating to myself whether or not it was true. Then again... I myself had turned into a vulpix and teleported to a world visibly different from mine. Why would there not be other forms of magic?

"It's weird," I eventually said.

"It is how it is," Topa replied, smiling. "You can feel those energies around yourself, but also around other pokemon if you are close enough."

Topa walked up to me and laid down by my tails.

"Close your eyes and try to feel the energy I emit."

I obeyed, but after several minutes of focus, I had to admit:

"I can't."

"You are a vulpix. Of course you can. You simply do not know that yet."

I tried a few more minutes, focusing with all my might on Topa. Unfortunately, I could smell her odour and hear her heart beating, but that was all I could do.

"I can't..." I whined, sitting down in disappointment.

"Alright," Topa said, standing up. I have an idea. Do I have permission to attack you?"

"Pardon? What... What are you going to do?"

"I am going to throw an Ember at you. Being hit by it should help you identify what it is."

"Ember? That's just a fireball, right?"

"Indeed."

"Won't it hurt?"

"It will be somewhat painful, but you being a Fire type, you will not be affected as much as other pokemon. Fire against fire is not very effective. I am not sure why humans talk about fighting fire with fire. It is clearly not a good idea."

Her amusingly candid reaction to the phrase made me chuckle.

"It's just a phrase," I explained. "It means using your opponent's strategy against them. It's not literal."

"Oh," she said, surprised. "I never thought of that. Are there many of these phrases?"

"Quite a lot," I replied, trying to think of more. "It's not important."

"Very well. I will show you real fire and unfire first."

After finishing her sentence, she breathed out a little flame. The flame was short and rotating like a whirlpool, but emitting strong heat that I could feel and shone with a faint comfortable light. Right next to Topa's muzzle, the fire was of a blinding white colour, but as it continued its journey to nowhere, it turned yellow, then orange, then red, and eventually disappeared into thin air. It looked a lot like a flamethrower, and it was sent by Topa.

"That was real fire," I said.

"Yes. You will learn this first. I hope it will not be too hard for you, but you will have to learn to control your powers. Remember what I said earlier."

The meagre display of such a small flame got me impressed, and I found myself excited again at the idea of breathing fire.

"Now, this is unfire. A simple fireball that you spit at your opponent. Humans refer to this as Ember."

She waited a second, then spat a fireball that travelled straight ahead, before hitting a wall and vanishing instantly. The fire looked real, but was emitting no light and no warmth. Instead, it emitted something else - something weird that I couldn't understand. It was a strange feeling in my guts, or in my brain, as if I was suddenly reminded of something I used to love doing.

"Can you do that again?" I asked.

She threw another Ember at the wall. This time, the fireball was bigger than the previous one, but travelled at the same surprisingly high speed. It gave me the same weird feeling that I couldn't describe. It took me a moment to understand what it was.

It was there. The warm sensation Topa told me to try to feel from her. In my chest, and around me. Like my inner flame, but slightly different, somewhat... excited. I myself felt like I had a lot more energy, and I felt extremely impatient and surprisingly confident.

"I feel weird."

"That is normal. Can you feel your inner flame changing? That is due to the energy I spent to throw these Ember. You detected the energy and you are now getting ready to fight. Of course, we will not fight, but your body is preparing for it."

This felt extremely weird. I felt like I had no control over my body, and I was merely doing what it told me to do.

"Now..." Topa walked back a few steps.

She threw an Ember at me, which hit me before I could even realise it had been thrown.

I instantly felt an entirely new kind of pain. It was like the pain was located outside of my body, covering it whole. Although the fireball hit me in the muzzle, every little bit of my body seemed to hurt, from the tip of my tails to the top of my snout. It was a very harsh and violently sudden pain, that disappeared less than a second after appearing. After it was gone, nothing had changed for me. My fur was not burnt, there was absolutely no pain anymore, and I was still standing where I was, tense and shocked.

My inner flame seemed to be more excited than ever. Although being hit by the Ember was painful, it felt very exciting, as if my body was demanding more. My inner flame was going completely crazy, expanding to reach the back of my throat, making me shiver with excitement - only to return to its normal size after a few seconds idling impatiently. Its effects, however, were not lost on me. I was extremely excited and full of energy.

"Can you feel it, now?" Topa asked.

"I'm not sure. I can... feel something. Something's changed about my inner fire. It became big, really big. And... different. It's not like a flame. There's something more."

"Exactly. And this something more that you feel is the equivalent of your inner flame for your unpowers."

"I feel... good," I admitted. "Excited. Full of energy. I would run around for hours if my belly didn't hurt."

"That is your body getting ready for a fight and asking for more," Topa said. "We pokemon enjoy those fights a lot, although it leads to a lot of pain, it is probably the most fun we have."

That at least explained why pokemon fought one another that way.

"What about the trainer, then?" I asked.

"I will answer that later," Topa smiled. "For now, learn to control your inner flame."

She came to sit next to me.

"Do you remember how you felt like your inner flame was growing?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Try to reproduce that. Make your inner flame grow."

It took me several minutes of intense focus to replicate it. Thinking of pokemon battles at first, I tried to imagine myself in one, but it didn't do anything, and I resorted to trying to remember the pain I had felt when Topa hit me with her Ember - to no avail. Finally, I tried imagining myself breathing fire, and the sensation of warmth in my chest slowly began expanding.

"I think I did it," I said.

Talking made my inner flame return to its normal size, which was a strangely disappointing feeling. Focusing again, I managed to replicate the experience, but my inner flame was quicker to grow.

"Perfect," Topa said, satisfied. "Now, you have to detach part of it and send it into your muzzle. Think of it like... rewinding time when you swallow something."

"So it's like vomiting?" I asked, slightly disgusted.

"Technically, yes, but it does not feel like it at all. Throwing a flame is pleasant. You will probably find yourself doing it without realizing it."

Frowning at the idea that I was supposed to force myself to vomit, I closed my eyes, focusing on my inner flame, ordering it to grow again. When it reached my throat, I did my best to remember how I felt when vomiting. Although nothing happened at first, I realized that the inside of my mouth was getting very warm. Blowing air from my muzzle as if I were whistling as a human, I was astonished to see a very small flame escape my muzzle and travel a few centimetres forward, before evaporating.

"Congratulations, Ruby!" Topa said, excited. "You just learnt how to breathe fire!"

Chapter 8

The idea that I had just breathed fire was too alien for me to accept. Still seeing the tiny flame that had escaped my mouth, I remained immobile a few seconds, astonished, having trouble imagining that it was mine - and even more so admitting it.

"Is something the matter?" Topa asked, slightly worried to see me petrified by what had just happened.

My head turned to look at her. "Was that really mine?"

"Well, of course!"

"No way," I whispered, more for myself than for her.

"Just try again."

I shook my head, hoping that it would relieve me of this eerie supernatural feeling I had, and focused once again on that warm part my belly, my inner flame, radiating its comfortable warmth through my entire body. Still uncomfortable, I tried to measure how big it was, but it was impossible for me to tell exactly where it ended. I could vaguely feel it near my heart, but it was as if it did not end and actually filled my entire body.

"I can feel the inner flame," I said, "but... I can't locate it. I don't know where it is."

"That is because it is not real fire. It is in you and that is all that matters. Come on, try again."

Focusing on the inner flame again, I imagined that a part of it got separated from the rest somewhere in my throat. Soon after, my muzzle started feeling hot, and I released the same small flame that vanished quickly.

"See?" Topa said, smiling. "This is your doing. You can breathe fire, now. You will need to practice to be able to do it at will instantaneously, but I trust you can do it."

I remained immobile and speechless for at least a whole minute. When I regained control of my body, I couldn't stop myself from breathing another transient flame, then repeatedly did so while running and jumping around Topa, extremely excited and proud of myself.

"That's incredible!" I said, before unleashing another of my little flames. "This is me? I can do that? I can't believe I can do that. This is real fire?"

I continued jumping around Topa for a few more minutes. Sitting in the middle of the room and following me as I couldn't contain my excitement, she was watching in silence with what I recognised to be an amused smile on her face. After I was done orbiting the ninetales, I sat in front of her, my tails waving furiously behind me, still excited.

"Remember that this is real fire," she said. "It is dangerous, so be careful. You can do what you want in this room, but no firebreathing outside of it unless ordered to."

That made sense, obviously. I had the ability to breathe fire. That made me abusively dangerous, although I was just a small fox. I could set things on fire, of course that would be restricted by humans.

"Wait a minute," I said, suddenly realizing something. "Isn't this dangerous for me too? What if I breathe fire on my leg?"

"Your fur is fireproof," Topa answered. "Your whole body is, pretty much. Real fire can hardly harm you if you are a bit careful."

I threw another of my small fireballs right to my front right paw. Although I could feel the heat, it led to no pain, as if I were just moving my hand close to a campfire to feel its warmth, but not close

enough to cause a burn. Slightly confused but enjoying the feeling, I amused myself by shooting fire at my legs, enjoying the warmth and the very idea that I was breathing fire.

"This is awesome," I said, still excited. "I'm breathing fire!"

"You are," Topa agreed, smiling. "However, the fire you are breathing is weak. Have you seen the size of your fireballs? Such small ones are hardly dangerous at all!"

My enthusiasm was cut short by her remark, but after a brief moment when I felt upset she would shut me down with such phlegm, I understood where she was coming from. I had to learn how to breathe fire like a normal vulpix in a very short time, and we couldn't afford to waste some over my minute achievements.

"What am I doing wrong?" I asked.

"Well... It takes you a bit of time to create the fire, but that is normal. Humans cannot breathe fire. Can they?"

"Well, no... Even in my world, there's no such thing as breathing fire."

"Your world?"

"Yes, I... I don't know how it happened, but... This isn't the world I lived in before... before this. There are no pokemon and..."

I paused, unsure of what Topa's reaction would be.

"That is a problem," she said after a few seconds of hesitation. "How different is this world compared to yours?"

"It's more or less the same, from what I've seen. Everything is identical, except... I'm a vulpix girl in a pokemon world, and there are no pokemon in my world."

"Do you think we can assume that, apart from pokemon, your previous world is the same as this one?"

"I assume so, yes."

"Alright."

Topa stood up, stretched, then started walking around the room, as if she was thinking. Sitting in the middle of one of the mats, close to the centre of the room, I continued amusing myself with my little fireballs, admiring the beautiful highlights created by the reflection of the orange light on the brown fur of my legs. Upon closer inspections, I realised that without the strong light, my fur was strangely discoloured and matt.

"Topa, what is wrong with my fur?" I asked.

"Your fur? Nothing is wrong with it."

I walked up to her and stretched my front right leg right by her muzzle for her to see.

"Nothing is wrong with it, but you look heavily malnourished. You will have good food and get better in no time here. You will be surprised by how your fur looks like then!"

I hoped so. I didn't like the feeling of looking malnourished, when I had a very pleasant life as a human, without the struggle of finding food.

"For your fire," Topa said, cutting my thinking short, "you will find it easier to breathe it with your muzzle open. Try this."

Topa came to my side so that we were facing the same direction. After a delay to make sure I was watching, she threw a small flame like my fireballs - that felt a lot hotter and more powerful than mine - and held it for a few seconds, her muzzle closed.

"This is what you are doing," she explained. "It works well to set wood on fire in winter, but it could be much more powerful."

She threw another flame, opening her muzzle wide. The fire that came out of it was mind-blowing. It was a perfect continuous stream of deadly plasma. I could feel the intense heat from where I was. Unlike the smaller flames, this torrent of death didn't vanish until it hit the mats on the wall and disappeared, scattered in a circle around the impact point. I couldn't refrain from commenting:

"Wow..."

"Impressed?" Topa asked with a concealed smile. "Try it. You do the same thing, but open your muzzle more."

I tried. My first few attempts were almost pathetic, as I could only breathe a small flame despite opening my jaw as much as I could. After a few fruitless attempts and while ignoring my growing frustration, I eventually figured out that I needed to create more fire, and focused on that, before opening my muzzle wide and throwing a larger flame.

"You are learning fast," Topa said, visibly impressed. "This is good. You are still not used to it, but if you practice enough, you will be able to breathe fire the moment you want it. You will have to learn to control the flame, but I believe you..."

She was interrupted by the door opening.

"Hey, Topa, Ruby," Agnes said, stepping in and leaving the door open.

Topa joyfully ran to her and rubbed herself against the human's legs, requested to be petted - wish granted instantly by Agnes, but I was a bit more reluctant to move. I felt embarrassed by Topa's purely animal reaction, like a pet celebrates its owner in the morning, and even more so by the realisation that I too wanted to be petted. Although I was expected to behave that way, I didn't see myself

jumping around, excited, trying to lick Agnes' hand as she tried to catch the running fox, and requesting to be petted on the head. That was how animals behaved, but I was no animal. I was a human.

"Ruby?" Agnes asked, crouching after Topa calmed down and sat next to her. "Come to me."

I obeyed, almost against my will and slowly walked up to her. When I was fully within her reach, she carefully grabbed me and hugged me, putting the top half of my body on her shoulder. If I were a human, I would have blushed at that exact moment. Sighing and giving in to urges I didn't want to have, I put my head on Agnes' shoulder in a shy attempt to cuddle.

"I will come back this evening," Agnes said, putting me back on the floor. "You stay with Topa, alright?"

I nodded. Agnes petted me again, kissed my forehead, and left the room. After she shut the door, I walked a few steps towards it, then remained immobile for several minutes.

"Are you alright?" Topa asked, walking up to me.

I didn't answer, focused on that closed door separating Agnes from me after we cuddled. Topa sat by my side, waiting patiently for me to reply, and we remained so immobile that the lights turned themselves off, burying the room in a dirty shroud of darkness. There was no light at all, for the door was airtight to ensure no fire would spread from the pokemon training room into other rooms. After several minutes of silence, I tried to stare at my paws. Although I could only see some spectral shadow, I knew where they were there and could imagine their fugitive shape through the darkness. I could feel my tails coming out of my body. They were down, resting on the floor, as were my ears. The room was dark and silent, apart from the heartbeats I could hear resonating in a strange way against the mats of the room. The resonating heartbeats were strangely low-pitched and reverberating, so much so that I began feeling scared of this

closed room. I was yet sitting still, in absolute silence, staring at my paws through this artificial night.

There was a noise outside of the room that jolted me back to reality, making me switch the lights back on. I instantly rushed at the door, my tails wagging impatiently.

"Agnes?" I called.

The noises continued for a minute or so, before going away and disappearing. I sighed, disappointed.

"Agnes left for college," Topa said, patting the top of my head.

"I know," I replied, pushing Topa's paw away.

"It seems you like Agnes a lot", Topa noticed, smiling.

Did I?

"She saved my life," I answered, looking away in embarrassment.
"It's normal that I'm attached to her."

This sounded more like a pathetic excuse than a real reason. What was wrong with me, playing hard to get and refusing to admit that I actually loved Agnes with all my soul?

Did I love Agnes? Most certainly. However... It wasn't the kind of love I was used to. It wasn't a human-to-human or human-to-pet kind of love. It wasn't like someone loves their partners. It was different. Was the fact she saved my life the only reason why I loved her? I had a debt to her, no doubt, but debts don't generate love. Yet, here I was, stalking a door, hoping that my human would come back and stay with me instead of leaving me alone in the dark room for the whole day. It wasn't exactly the love one has towards members of their family. It was... less rational. I had known Agnes for barely a week, maybe slightly more, and yet I was already fully in love with

her. It wasn't a sexual kind of attraction either. I felt like Agnes was the most important thing in my life. Could it be...

"You love Agnes, do you not?" Topa asked, poking me with her muzzle.

I didn't dare formulate an answer and remained silent, avoiding Topa's eyes, embarrassed.

"You should not be embarrassed," Topa said. "It is normal for a pet to love their human. If you are lucky, you can even call your master by their name, and not just master!"

"Can I call Agnes Agnes?" I asked, noticing Topa called her "master".

"Absolutely! I was raised to call the humans master, but you are still very young, so I do not think they would mind."

"Young? I was over twenty years old when I was human..."

"Twenty? Oh my."

"Topa, how old am I?"

"Did you not say you were twenty?"

"When I was human, yes. But now I'm... I'm a vulpix, right? This isn't my body. So... how old am I? How old is this body?"

Topa hesitated to answer. After I poked her several times, she finally gave in.

"You are young. Very young. Still a child. I would say... Two to three years old."

I wasn't sure how to react. So I was a kid? Nothing more than a baby? Was that the reason why I loved Agnes so much? Did I see her as some motherly figure?

"Is that why I love Agnes so much?"

"It is possible," Topa answered after a short silence. "You may have the body of a vulpix, your mind is still human. When I heard you were going to be adopted, I was excited to have a kit to take care of, but you did not behave like a kit would. Then you explained to me that you are human..."

"So?"

"I think that you see Agnes as a motherly figure. You are a human, right? You cannot possibly see a ninetales such as me as your mother. You barely identify as a vulpix if at all. However, you are a kid, and your young body affects the way you think. You may still be human, but you are no longer an adult. So... I assume you chose Agnes as the motherly figure over me, since... You are human."

I remained silent, conscious that this unconscious decision was actually upsetting her.

"If you are right, then you will eventually become my motherly figure," I said, trying to cheer her up.

"Why so?"

"I... I've been a vulpix for what? Ten days? Nine? Either way, I remember when I first woke up, I wasn't ready to be a fox at all... And now I'm accepting my fate as a pet and already behaving a lot more foxy than I thought I even could. This body is taking a toll on me. I genuinely think that I'm turning into a fox at mind. I... I won't be a human for long. And then... Well, it will be like you are..."

I choked on my own tears. Why was I about to cry now? I was just talking, and yet, I felt unbearably sad. I was thinking about my family, my pets, and my friends. I would probably never get to see them again. I didn't know what happened to my human body. Was I dead? Unconscious? In a coma? What were my friends and family doing? To me, they simply disappeared as I was turned into a vulpix and

thrown into a different world, but what about the me that didn't leave my original realm?

Thinking back about my family was too much for me and I started crying. This switched the lights back on, and Topa came to me and hugged me.

"I miss them, Topa," I whined. "I miss my parents and my pets and my friends. I want to see them. They are my true family. I don't have a family here."

"If you want," Topa whispered in my ear, covering me with her tails, "I can be your family."

That only made me cry louder, and I pushed my body against Topa's, cuddling as much as I could as she made a bed out of her tails for me. I nested on it, putting my head on one of Topa's paws, and fell into a fragile slumber.

I was woken up a few hours later by a strange clicking sound and a flash of light I noticed through my closed eyelids, which woke me up. Still very sleepy, I had trouble opening my eyes, but recognized Agnes' scent instantly. Raising my head, I saw her at the door with a camera in her hands.

"Hey Ruby, did I wake you up?" Agnes smiled.

I yawned for an answer.

"Ah, sorry. I wanted to take a picture of you two, you are adorable."

Topa was still sleeping, it seemed. Our position from when I fell asleep had not changed, and I was comfortably tucked under Topa's tails. I struggled to get out of the improvised bed as quietly as I could to avoid waking the ninetales up. As I stumbled up to Agnes' feet, she crouched to pick me up and pet me.

"Come with me," she said, carrying me in her arms. "Melissa came back from school and wants to see you."

I could only assume that Melissa was her little sister, who spent the entire weekend at a friend's place. If she was back from school, that meant that it was late in the afternoon and we would soon have dinner. I could smell the food being cooked and started thinking about Rakuen, wondering if she would be given kitchen work today as well.

Agnes walked up the stairs to the bedrooms, took me to the end of the corridor, turning right, and knocked at the door. Melissa's bedroom was facing the parents', while Agnes' was facing Topa's.

The door opened and a young girl appeared at the doorstep. I couldn't peek inside the room, as the door was barely opened, but the girl noticed me instantly and shouted:

"Ah, so cute!"

She then threw her arm forward to try to touch me. Scared of this loud person, I dodged the attack and tried to climb onto Agnes' shoulders to hide behind her head. Unfortunately, Agnes' grasp on me was too strong and I stayed in her arms, bent backwards to keep as far as I could from her little sister.

"Eh? Why is she scared?" Melissa asked, obviously disappointed I refused to be touched.

"You are too brutal," Agnes replied, trying to hide her laughter. "Remember she's still mostly wild, so you can't come forward yelling like this."

Agnes was obviously amused by the situation. Melissa, however, began pouting, unhappy from having been called loud.

"Her name is Ruby," Agnes continued. "Come on Ruby, don't be scared. This is Melissa, my little sister. She's very kind but a bit

impatient."

"I'm not impatient!" Melissa shouted, disagreeing with all her might.

I could see in her eyes she was dying to pet me, but I wasn't exactly looking forward to it. She seemed to be rather clumsy.

"Come on, Ruby," Agnes repeated with insistence. "Say hello."

It wasn't a gentle push, this time. Although her tone was still friendly, there was no kindness in her words. It was a direct order to let Melissa touch me. Upset that she would disregard my feelings and order me to do something I didn't want to do, I whined, but Agnes didn't change her mind, and I eventually threw a shy "hello" to Melissa. Of course, all she heard was "vulpix", but that seemed to be enough for her. She jumped where she was with excitement.

"Hello!" she answered. "Can I pet you?"

I looked at Agnes from the corner of my eyes. She still looked kind, but was staring at me to make me understand she was watching me. I had no choice but to obey, and I slowly nodded to allow Melissa to pet me. She was so impatient that she was shaking, and I could see the moment when her overhyped arm met my terrified head a bit too fast, knocking me out on the spot. As she started stretching her arm, I tensed up, closing my eyes, ready to pass out from the innocent brutality of the young girl.

There was no such encounter, and I felt a timid hand slowly touching my head. Finger by finger, as if she were scouting my head before petting me, Melissa put her hand on my fur, under the little ball of orange fluff that covered the top of my skull. Seeing no reaction from me, she took her fingers back for a short second, then put all her hand on my head. After regaining confidence, she started stroking the back of my head, between my ears. She stroked several spots on my head, trying to find the ones I liked, being so careful that I slowly calmed down and began enjoying being petted.

There was something different in the way Melissa was petting me compared to how Agnes or her father did before. Although she seemed to be generally more careful, the petting felt... better. After only a few seconds of being petted, I found myself closing my eyes, enjoying the feeling, and pushing my head against Melissa's hand in an effort to show her I was enjoying the moment. She smiled and continued petting me, rubbing my ears and stroking the top of my head.

"So cute!" she said, happy that I let her touch me.

"She is still recovering," Agnes said while putting me back on the floor. "Be careful with her, especially her belly."

"What happened?" Melissa asked.

Agnes turned her eyes away, unwilling to answer the question. Melissa seemed to be upset not to get a response, but displayed her usual smile again when I walked up to her and poked her with my muzzle, asking for more ear rubbing. She crouched and obliged, happy that I accepted her and let her touch me.

As expected, we were soon called for dinner, and I felt a bit disappointed not to see Rakuen serving us. Topa explained to me that the maid taking care of dinner was the one attached to her. She was obviously older and more experienced than Rakuen, who felt like she was new to her job, and the little time I spent with her made me dislike her. Topa found it amusing, for she got along well with her maid, saying she was less grumpy than she looked. After dinner, everyone went in their own room, and Topa and I simply followed. We had spent enough time in the pokemon training room for now, and I needed to rest on what I had learnt.

Chapter 9

The day after, Melissa brought Topa to her classes, leaving me alone in the gigantic house. Although I felt invigorated from my recent learning to breathe fire, I was missing the ninetales and decided to roam the second floor looking for some human to notice my presence, carefully avoiding the left wing as Topa told me to.

I couldn't stop thinking about our conversation the day before. I missed my family a lot, and I had the sad feeling that I would never get to see them anymore and would live the rest of my life as a vulpix. I didn't have a family here and I would never know what happened to me in my original world. Would I ever get close enough to Topa to consider her family? To Agnes? What would become of me if I didn't manage to open up to anyone and condemned myself to solitude?

As I was brooding, looming over the stairs that I still did not dare take, Agnes walked to me and gave me a quick pet on the head that I gladly accepted. Thinking I was scared of going down the stairs because of my wound, she had the kindness to carry me down, and after she left for school, I was left alone once again, stuck in the first floor.

At least I didn't have nothing to do. Hoping the day would feel shorter, I went into the pokemon training room to practice firebreathing. It took me some time to remember how I did it, but once I successfully threw a small flame before me, I had no trouble repeating the action. I kept breathing small flames, my muzzle almost closed, as it felt easier for me - not much harder than just blowing a candle - but my flames remained weak and vanished quickly after I blew them. Remembering what Topa said, I tried opening my muzzle, but all I could do was cough without producing any fire. The more I tried, the harder I coughed.

"Ruby?" a voice asked through the door.

I jolted, turning around. The door soon opened, revealing Rakuen wearing her usual maid outfit, with a wet broom in her hand. The floor behind her was intensely reflecting light and a pleasant odour of soap invaded the training room.

"I heard coughing. Are you alright?"

She gave a hint of taking a step forward, but refrained and didn't move from the door, opting to observe my reaction from afar. The distance she had kept between us made me relieved to notice that she remembered that I wasn't comfortable around her, but at the same time, I felt guilty for not letting her touch me. Imagining myself in her position, I would probably have been very upset if a vulpix didn't let me touch it, especially if it was to be the new family pet. In spite of the guilt, I decided to stay where I was.

"Well, now that I'm here, can I come and sweep the mats?" Rakuen asked with a shy tone.

I nodded and threw a joyful "sure". Although I wasn't too happy having her around breaking into my practising, I had no right to stop her from doing her job.

She entered the room with her broom, walking against the wall to show that she did not mean to disrupt me, and started sweeping the floor, starting from the back wall and progressively going back to the entrance. Forgetting about my practice completely, I remain immobile in the middle, staring at her in silence while she was working. Although she regularly peeked at me as she crept closer, she didn't seem to mind it and was whistling quietly to amuse herself. When she reached me, she didn't attempt petting or even touching me and stopped for a moment to give me time to walk away, but I didn't move until she poked me with her broom. The sudden contact with the wood made me jolt and jump away, causing Rakuen to giggle, and she resumed her work without disturbing me further.

I hadn't even noticed she was so close. The stick she was holding and moving had been hypnotising to the point where all my focus had been locked on it, and after my distracted reverie ended, I ended up following it slowly, crawling as a predator crawls upon its prey, waiting for its chance. The maid, of course, did not fail to notice what I was doing, but ignored me for a few minutes, then abruptly stopped cleaning to hold the broom out in my direction. The moment the stick stopped, I launched myself into the air and landed front paws first on it, then tried to dig around it, biting the broom sometimes to try to get hold of it. With a large smile on her face, Rakuen moved it away regularly as I kept trying to get a hold of it, then patiently waited until I gave up and returned to my silent stalking to continue her work, but had to deal with me attempting to steal the broom from her every time she had the misfortune of standing still for too long. She still managed to evade my attacks skillfully, gracefully dancing, her long skirt flying around her legs in a charming movement. After a few minutes, I realised that I was actually having fun, and abandoned all my carefulness and reluctance to pour myself fully into the improvised game. Unfortunately, my fun eventually came to an end as Rakuen reached the door. She picked up the mix of ashes and fur that she gathered and threw it in a big black plastic bag, then turned back to me. Smiling happily, she bent forward and gave me the broomstick, but as she was stretching a hand forward to pet me, I grabbed my trophy and ran back to the centre of the room, watching her carefully as she left, disappointed but smiling, and closed the door behind her. Once she was out of sight, I let go of the stick, laid besides it, and started chewing on it. I was the victor for the day.

When Topa came back in the evening, she immediately came in the pokemon sports room, only to find me asleep by the broom I had victoriously stolen. She softly woke me up, saying she was back and asking how my day had been.

"Pretty long," I said, yawning and sitting down. "I practised firebreathing most of it, but that wasn't very fun."

"Where did you get this?" Topa asked, staring at the broom.

"I took it from the maid," I said, inflating my chest proudly. "The one assigned to me... Rakuen."

"Did you steal it?"

"I won it!" I replied.

"Won?"

"I..."

Only then did it strike me. I had played a game with a human and taken the broom as my prize. There was nothing human in that - nothing at all. I had completely given in to my instincts and the playful, fully animal fox that was now a part of me had easily overcome the careful, fully human part. Thinking back about it, I did remember having a lot of fun, and that memory made me ashamed of how I behaved. Topa, however, seemed not to see it the same way.

"You played with the maid, did you not?"

I turned my head away, heavily embarrassed.

"That is fantastic!" Topa said, obviously excited.

"Huh?"

"I remember you expressing doubts about accepting yourself as a vulpix, but it looks to me like you are not having as many problems as you thought. This is great news! If you can naturally act like a vulpix would, you will not have to worry about anyone finding out!"

I blushed, although it was hard to spot on my orange fur. I wasn't happy with this new development. I didn't want to be a fox, and I apparently was already fully indulging in fox-like behaviours.

"I don't want to be a fox," I said after a few minutes of silence.

Topa's face turned from joyful to puzzled then to sad from puzzled in less than a second.

"I am not sure what to say," she admitted. "I can see that being a vulpix does not make you happy, but..."

"It can't be helped, I know," I finished, sighing.

There was another pause.

"Why did it happen to me?" I complained.

"Pardon?"

"Why did I turn into a vulpix? Why me? What did I do to deserve this?"

I was about ready to cry. There was another long silence. Topa was staring into the void, seeming deep in her thoughts. Wondering what she was thinking about, I remained immobile until she eventually looked at me. She looked a bit angry, at least annoyed.

"Why do you think of it as a punishment?" Topa asked.

"Huh?"

"The way you complain sounds like you consider turning into a vulpix to be a punishment," she explained.

"I..."

I couldn't disagree with it, but I felt ashamed of feeling that way. As a human, I was probably convinced that animals were indeed inferior, although I claimed not to think it, and now that I was an animal, I realised how stupid the idea was.

"I won't ever see my family again, or my friends or my pets. I can't do what I liked to do anymore. Everything I had is... it's gone. I..."

"This is not about what you have lost," Topa interrupted me.

Intimidated, I flattened my ears and laid on the floor, not quite ready to be lectured, but certainly about to be.

"It might take time for you to accept it, but you have a family here," Topa said. "You will have new hobbies and new things you like, but you have yet to discover them. How long have you been a vulpix for?"

"Nine days," I answered, whispering.

"You will recover those things. There is something about being a fox that you do not like. As if it were... A punishment."

I stayed silent, trying to find the words to explain myself. In spite of the commanding tone of her voice, something was wavering in Topa's eyes as she was avoiding mine. I wasn't sure if she herself was sad or if she was sad for me. Were pokemon capable of empathy?

"Can I be honest?" I asked.

"Please be. Thinking of your transformation as a punishment is hurting you. You need to part from that."

"Well... Humans think animals are inferior," I said bluntly.

"You told me," Topa said. "Is that why you think of... all this as a bad thing?"

"I guess? I'm not sure, it's... I feel so embarrassed by everything I do. When I played with Rakuen... I didn't realise I was being... a normal vulpix, I guess? It didn't feel special to me. I... I even had fun. Now that I think back about it, it's... it's degrading."

"Degrading," Topa repeated.

There was another silence. To my relief, Topa didn't seem angry anymore, but looked sad.

"You keep thinking of yourself as a human," she said. "You should not. You no longer are human, you are a vulpix and what you did is perfectly normal. If anything, you should be proud to have been able to act naturally. You are adapting to your new body and that means a lot."

"I never wanted this body. I don't want to adapt to it."

"You are thinking of this as a punishment again. Why not think of it as a reward?"

"How can it be a reward? I... It basically started my life all over."

"Should you not be thankful for that? Is that not something you have wished for before? Everyone wishes they could start over, and you get a chance to. How can you not think of this as something incredible?"

My eyes widened for a second as I failed to reply immediately.

"How do you even know that?" I asked. "That's... that's psychology. That's even close to philosophy."

"Well, there are a few things about humans that I understand, and one of them is that they always seem to create purely imaginary problems for themselves. Melissa once told me she wishes she could start over and be born in a family that isn't this rich because she feels like no one likes her because she has money and they are all jealous of it. I have seen her interact with other humans and it does not seem to me like anyone hates her. She has a lot of friends and I could tell that they like her. I do not understand why she thinks otherwise, but she does and it hurts her. You are doing the same thing. Instead of looking at facts, you are imagining that turning into a vulpix is something that happened because of something you did and take it as a punishment. Even then, you could also take it as a

reward but chose to take it as a punishment because you consider animals to be inferior, and turning into one is, as you said, degrading, and probably because it fits whatever negative image of yourself you currently have."

That was rather impressive. I didn't expect a simple fox to think this deeply and understand at least parts of how the human mind worked. Once again, I felt like I was facing another human, but for the first time since I had met her, I had the disturbing feeling she was more intelligent than me.

Topa understood that she hit the nail on the head and smiled.

"Let's try to think of it as something positive, okay? You get a chance to restart your life, so if there is anything you have done before that you wish you had not, you have a chance not repeat the mistake! You even have a chance to live a whole life while retaining the experiences of a past one!"

"I never wanted to restart my life," I said, pouting. "I was pretty happy with what I had."

"Have you ever made mistakes you wish you could repair?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

"You get a chance not to repeat them, then! Why are you looking at everything so negatively? You need to smile more. Come on, smile, smile, smile!"

She bent playfully, her tails happy wagging in a hypnotizing movement behind her, but I was not willing to play. Facing my lack of response, she simply laid down, disappointed.

"You need to smile more," she said. "You are too depressed. Again, stop thinking of your transformation as a punishment. You are living something no one has ever lived before you, in either of our worlds - you turned into an animal. This is a unique experience."

"I never asked for it."

"Things happen without anyone asking for them. This is how the world works. Stop worrying about the whys. No one can answer the questions you asked earlier, so why ask them? Simply live your life and do not ask questions that admit no answer, or you will be miserable pursuing things that do not exist. Worry about things that can be solved, like tonight's dinner!"

I couldn't help but smile. I was fairly hungry, and Topa's endless optimism was taking a toll of my depressed mood.

"Okay," I conceded, standing up. "I'll try."

The day after was a Wednesday, if my count was not wrong. This time, Topa was left at home with me, and we spent the day in the practice room again. She seemed to be very happy with my progress, although I hadn't practised much, but kept saying I needed to open my muzzle wider.

"You are swallowing most of your flames", she said. "You need to be able to breathe fire with your muzzle open if you want to be able to learn Ember."

"It's too hard," I complained.

"That is why you have to practise!"

I sulked. I was aware of it, but all I wanted was to be able to breathe fire properly and not have to go through the hours of coughing I was likely to need. I wanted to be able to use my powers there and then and not have to wait, but unfortunately for me, I was going to have to.

Topa poked my pouting cheek with her muzzle to get me to keep going. "If it is any motivation, I will teach you Ember once you can breathe fire properly."

Compared to breathing fire, using a pokemon power seemed like nothing. I was however still looking forward to pokemon battles, as much as they scared me.

"Wait," I said, realising something. "For battles, are we using real powers? Isn't that dangerous? Do pokemon..."

"Of course not!" Topa replied. "Do you remember what I explained? You have two kinds of powers. Fire and unfire. The auras. Remember?"

As hard as I tried, I couldn't remember what all that was about. After admitting it to Topa, she seemed a bit disappointed, but promised to explain it to me again. I was suddenly interested - very interested - in what exactly those powers were and how they worked, but I needed to breathe fire properly first.

"So... What do I need to do to learn Ember?"

"First, learn to breathe fire with your muzzle open. That way, you will be able to reach the full power of your fire - it will be useful for future moves and might serve you in a real fight."

"Real fight? I thought pokemon only fought with the moves."

"Well, generally, yes, but... Real fights happen as well. Sometimes, pokemon fight with the will to kill their opponent, and then it is not a sport anymore..."

"All is well in love and war, heh?"

"Pardon?"

"It's a proverb. Or... a saying. I'm not sure what the difference is. It basically means that for love and war you can do anything to achieve victory and are not bound by the rules of fair play."

"Well... Let us hope you never get in such a fight, alright?"

"Yeah."

I spent the rest of the day practising firebreathing under Topa's careful eye. She sometimes stopped me to give me advice on what to do or what I was doing wrong, and by the end of my training session, I was able to breathe more powerful fire, but the ninetales didn't seem to be satisfied yet. Too tired, I opted to stop for the day, and Topa agreed that it was time to rest. As dinner was about to be served, I went back to the lounge to wait there, laying on the soft carpet the different chairs were resting on, uncomfortable with the idea of being on the floor given how tense my belly still was. Rakuen was in there, together with an old man I didn't recognize, but his posture and smell made me understand he was important and his authoritative aura immediately scared me. Judging by his uniform, he was one of the butlers, and judging by Rakuen's red face and repeated apologizing, I could only assume the man was her superior, probably the chief of all the maids and butlers, and she was being lectured. When she was certain the man left, she sighed, visibly disappointed.

"Hey Ruby," she said.

Walking to the side of the sofa, she crouched at a respectful distance from me, waiting to see if I would come to her or not. Disappointed I wouldn't, she stood back up.

"I forgot to come pick up the broom you took. I got lectured because of it..."

She looked immensely sad, as if being lectured was the worst thing to ever happen to her. In an effort to comfort her, I ran to the practice room, found the broom that I had discarded by a wall, and brought it back to her. After putting it on the floor in front of me, I pushed it with my muzzle towards her, and she picked it up without trying to touch me.

"You chewed on it," she said as if to lecture me, although she sounded more amused than angry. "I hope I won't get in trouble for

that too."

Feeling responsible for the trouble she had already been in and for the possibility of getting lectured again, I laid my ears down and looked her from the top of my eyes, then slowly crawled towards her. I took time to sniff the hand she had stretched towards me again, trying to get used to her odour to be able to recognize it. She still smelled as nice as I remembered, and had a weirdly friendly and somewhat naive odour. Maybe I could trust her?

"Ruby?" a voice asked.

Startled, I jumped in place, then ran under the table, protected from this new intruder. I quickly recognised the new odour, however, and happily ran to Agnes as she stepped into the room.

"Hello," she said, petting me as I was pushing my head against her knees to ask to be petted. "Hello Rakuen!"

"Hello Agnes," she replied, standing up then bowing to her master.

She successfully hid a disappointed sigh from Agnes, but not from me - making me realise that Agnes' unfortunate arrival had interrupted our bonding moment.

"I'm sorry," Agnes said. "I interrupted you... Looks like Ruby's willing to trust you, though, right?"

This sounded less than a question and more than an order to me. Unhappy, my tails stopped wagging and spread out horizontally behind me as I laid my ears and stepped back a few steps. After a few moments of hesitation, I looked at Agnes who was staring at me, looking somewhat angry, at least very stern, as if to silently order me to trust the maid. I took a few more steps back, looking at the maid who was silently standing up not far from me, obviously unhappy with how things had turned out, my tails touching the floor and my ears laid back, and after a few seconds of hesitation, I tensed up, shouted "sorry", and ran away from the room.

"I'm not sure she's ready to let you touch her yet," Agnes said as I hid behind the door of the practice room.

Agnes didn't seem to be angry at me for disobeying when she came to tell me dinner was served. I expected to be punished, but she just petted me with a kind smile and repeated that I could trust the maids. I understood she didn't want to force me to interact with them, but did want me to at least let them touch me. It would obviously be needed for them to wash, groom, or generally care for me. There was something about Rakuen's odour that I liked, although I wasn't capable of explaining why. Unlike the other maids I came across, she was friendly and seemed to actually care about me. Maybe I should actually give her a chance...

"You definitely should," Topa said when I consulted her on the matter. "She does seem to like you a lot. I do not understand why you insist on staying away from everyone."

"They scare me," I replied. "I'm not ready to interact with humans. I don't want them to find out."

"I think we have already discussed that," Topa replied, referring to our earlier conversation. "The odds they find out are very low, especially considering you are already naturally behaving normally for a vulpix."

"I know..." I sighed.

I was a bit tired of Topa repeating that. Although she was probably right, I wasn't sure I actually wanted to behave like an animal. Thinking about what I saw my cats and dogs do made me embarrassed. I knew I was no longer human and I was unhappy with it. Yet... There was something about being a little fox that was enjoyable. Although I was still wounded, I inexplicably loved the feeling of having tails. On top of that, I wasn't just a fox - I was a pokemon and there was still much for me to discover and learn about. I was most looking forward to battles, and I was fairly angry at Topa for not wanting to teach me any moves yet, despite

understanding her careful attitude. I could feel that there was a part of me that was much more impatient and careless than I normally would be, and I was scared it would eventually take over and I would become... just a fox.

"You focus too much on the negatives," Topa said once we were on our respective beds. "You are always thinking that you do not want to be a vulpix, or that humans might find out your secret, but that just brings you down."

"You're repeating yourself," I replied, rather annoyed. "You're always saying I should be happy to be a vulpix and all, but you don't understand my situation."

"That is true. I probably never will, but I want to help you, and seeing you depressed all the time is not something I enjoy. I do not know what it would take to make you happy, but I want to try, and the way I see it, I need to make you comfortable with your current life. You cannot hate your life and be happy."

"I don't hate my life, I'm just... All this is beyond me. I'm... I turned into a vulpix and I have no idea how, why, or even when. I just... went to bed, and poof! I'm a vulpix. Hell, I was even dead when I woke up. I'm just... Out of control. It's depressing. When I was human, I had some power over my life. I could make choices, but now... I can't even choose what I'm going to eat. It's like the most basic freedom has been taken from me."

Topa remained silent for several minutes. After a long wait, she eventually said:

"I think you are wrong."

"Huh?"

"Rather... I think you are lying to yourself. Freedom... That is a purely human concept. No one is ever really free. We are all bound by obligations. When you were human, you had to go to school, had

laws to obey, rules in your household. Even your own consciousness took away your so-called freedom. I have heard about freedom of speech and similar human ideals, but they are delusions. Your own body restricts your freedom to what it is capable of doing. Your own mind limits your freedom to what it can think. Why are humans trying to live by ideals that lie to them? Animals are a lot happier than humans because they do not bother with all those problems. Pets or not, dogs and cats are happy. As long as they have food and a safe place to sleep, they are happy. What more do you need in life but food and shelter?"

"So... You consider humans are not animals?"

"Well... I am not sure how they define the word 'animal', but in essence, indeed. They parted from us a long time ago when they decided to create all those problems for themselves. You are an animal now, try thinking like one? You have food, you have a shelter, you even have a family to love you and play with you. That is more than most animals have, and yet, you are not happy. Why?"

I blushed and looked away. Once again, I had the disturbing feeling that Topa was actually more intelligent than me. She seemed to have much deeper thinking about things I never even thought about. To every question I had she could give an elaborated answer, and to every answer I have she could raise questions. I felt powerfully outsmarted and that made me extremely uneasy.

"Do pokemon often think about those things?" I asked.

"Pardon?"

"You... You can give complex answers to every metaphysical, psychological, or philosophical question I have. It's... It's impressive but out of character for... for a fox, I mean... I see a fox but I feel like I'm talking with a person. It's unsettling."

"Well... Most pokemon are capable of this, but I assume most do not bother. I have been in a human family all my life, so I was probably

contaminated by the way they think... I honestly find all those questions interesting. It might be unusual for a pokemon, but I like thinking about them."

Everything suddenly made sense to me, but the realization was shocking.

"Topa?" I asked, unsure of how exactly to word my question.

"Yes?"

"I have a weird question."

"Sure. I will do my best to answer."

"Are you, er... Have you..."

I sighed and decided to simply ask as directly as I could.

"Topa... Are you a human too?"

Chapter 10

Topa blinked several times, her eyes widened by surprise, clearly caught off-guard by the question. She remained silent for what felt like several minutes, then turned her head away from me.

"Sorry, Ruby. I am not. I was born a vulpix. The only transformation I underwent was my evolution."

I wasn't sure if I was relieved or sad to hear it. If that was true, then I still didn't understand how and why she seemed to believe my story even though she had absolutely no reason to, which meant I was at a complete loss when it came to understanding her. On the other hand, that would mean that she would indeed be able to help me learn to behave like a normal vulpix and to teach me moves and possibly how to fight, which I was looking forward to. If, however, she turned out to be lying and to be a human like me, there would probably be a lot of things that I would not learn from her, as she herself couldn't possibly know them.

In spite of that, I had a hard time believing her. Her saying that she was born the same day as Melissa, the human she was assigned to, felt a bit too big of a coincidence for me. Could it be that she referred to the day she turned into a vulpix as her "birth"? If so, why would she lie to me or hide the fact she was human? Did she think I took pride in my transformation, because it was something that never happened to anyone before? Was she, on the contrary, rightfully assuming that turning into a vulpix caused me dismay and was trying to reassure me by saying no one else had gone through that before?

"Is something the matter?" Topa asked.

I remained silent for a few seconds before deciding to be bluntly honest with her. "Why do you believe me?"

"When you say you are a human? I just do. I cannot explain it. I suppose you are expecting a logical explanation, or at least a few reasons that make me believe you, but I cannot provide that."

I wasn't satisfied with her cryptic answer. To me, it felt like she didn't want to give me her reasons to believe me or her lack of reasons not to, but I couldn't understand why. Was she afraid I would use them against her, to fuel my hatred for this body and this transformation?

"Are you alright?" she asked, clearly worried.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I... I don't understand why you believe me. I myself have a hard time believing you. I just... I just feel like you're more intelligent than me and..."

Her paw abruptly coming in contact with the top of my head cut sentence short. She had walked up to me and began petting me.

"You cannot keep thinking like this, Ruby," she said, her voice wavering with irritation. "I am not more intelligent than you and you are not more intelligent than me. You cannot think of someone as superior to someone else. It is very obviously hurting you. Who is more intelligent does not matter. What matters is that you have been turned into a vulpix, neither of us know why, and we have to make sure that your life here is as pleasant as possible. I do not know if it is possible for you to turn back into a human, but in the eventuality it is not, it is no use fretting over such insignificant matters and making yourself miserable."

"It's not my fault," I said.

"I know. The way I see, you can either let yourself be miserable or do something against it. It feels to me like you have chosen the first one, but I do hope that with time, you will start feeling better. As much as I wish I could, I cannot make you happy. This effort will have to come from you."

Did I even want to be happy? I was not fine with this body and I wished I could turn back into a human, but would I accept to be happy as a vulpix if that were impossible? Would being happy mean that I accepted the new body? Why did I even refuse to?

I turned my head, looking at Topa, who was looking at me, clearly worried. If she was actually more intelligent than me, would she be able to help me for more than I initially thought? Did I trust her?

"You should sleep," she said, breaking the silence. "You look tired. Hopefully you will feel clearer tomorrow. We will have to continue practising, too, so you should get some sleep. Please rest."

I couldn't disagree with that. Laying on my pillow, I turned around to face a wall, staring at it trying to imagine what I looked like. I was no longer human - was that enough to make me unhappy?

"Will you want to continue practising firebreathing?" Topa asked me after Agnes left for college.

"Do I really have anything else to do?"

"I have yet to make you visit the gardens," Topa said after a moment of hesitation. "I am waiting for assurance from the pokemon centre that you have recovered. I do not want to risk anything with the grass or the water."

"Water?"

"There is a stream of water that runs near the house. You have heard it, have you not?"

I had to admit that I had never noticed. Was Topa's hearing better than mine? How come I never heard it?

"Yeah," I lied. I didn't want to admit that I was not able to use my hearing while she expected I would be. "But... I didn't know it was close. I still have a hard time figuring out where things are..."

"Oh. New senses? How are a human's senses?"

The question caught me by surprise and it took some time to think about before I could answer. While I was silently musing over how to describe a human's senses to her, Topa led me to the pokemon training room, crouching to pass through the small cat door, while I could pass through it without trouble.

"Well, hearing is a lot worse. A human's ears aren't very sensitive, and they can't move, so it's hard to make out a sound's location. But these..."

I moved my ears around to get a better feel for them. It was extremely odd for me to do so, as I could feel them at the top of my head instead of on the sides, and every movement I did modified the sounds I perceived in a confusing way. I was aware it was meant to help me locate a sound's origin, but I was unable to do it properly.

"Also," I added, "the range of sounds they can hear is much lower."

"Range of sounds?"

"Frequencies," I corrected.

"What is a frequency?"

"Huh?"

"I do know what a frequency is when it comes to... doing things regularly, but I do not understand how it applies to sounds."

I remained silent a few seconds with a satisfied look on my face that I hoped Topa would not see. As much as I felt that she was more intelligent than me, I had never realized how much more I knew about how the world worked thanks to my education. Topa was just a fox and had never learnt about anything like that. There was no way she could understand.

"Well... I can explain?" I proposed. "Basically... Er..."

How should I explain how sound waves worked to someone who had no notions of physics whatsoever? I would have to explain up to the very basics and I wasn't sure I would be able to.

"Sounds are waves," I hazarded.

"Waves? Like when water advances towards a beach?"

"Yes! Except... water doesn't actually move forward. It only moves up and down."

"But... The waves move forward. And then they crash into the beach. And if water only moves up and down, why do waves crash ashore instead of just collapsing where they are?"

"Not the same waves. Waves at a beach are created by winds and currents. The waves I'm talking about... hold on, I'll show you."

I led Topa to the water bowls we had in the lounge. Of our two bowls, hers was a lot bigger, probably to accommodate to her larger muzzle or larger thirsts, and would do fine for my experiment. I had to find something to put in the water to float.

"Topa where can I find something that floats?"

"I can find some little piece of wood in the gardens, if you want," she proposed. "Or a leaf. Please wait, I will be back soon."

She hurried out of the room, visibly excited to hear what I had to say. Did she know what I planned on doing? Was she playing dumb to make me feel better? If she used to be a human, she would know those things, so why was she acting like she didn't?

Waiting for Topa, I regularly poked the water with the very tip of my paw to create circular waves in it. Although I found it amusing, watching my own little experiment made my stomach collapse. I would probably never get to learn more physics or math or any of the

things I used to study as a human. Would my current knowledge eventually fade away and disappear as I became more of a vulpix?

"Having fun, Ruby?"

The sudden voice made me jolt around, but I relaxed when I recognised Rakuen. She was not wearing her maid outfit, but a simple white summer dress with a small light blue vest on top of it. She looked gorgeous in it, standing by the door, smiling at me, holding a book in her hand. I remembered Agnes' order to trust the maids, but I wasn't quite sure I wanted to be petted as I wasn't in the mood for it, but I knew I would get in trouble if Agnes learnt I was still avoiding the maid. Walking slowly, I made my way from the bowls of water to her, unhappy about having to let her touch me essentially against my will.

She stretched her hand towards me for me to sniff, which I did. I quickly found myself enjoying the pleasantness of her body odour that wasn't fully hidden under a flowery perfume - there was something about it that I was fond of. In an effort to get more of her friendly smell and to show her that I did like her, I gave her hand a few laps of my tongue, then allowed her to pet me. Her face immediately lit up when I deposited my head in her hand, but I felt disappointed at myself. I still remembered the little game I had unwillingly played with her and felt ashamed of it. However, Rakuen seemed to enjoy petting me more than I enjoyed being petted.

"Today is a day off for me," she said. "I don't have much to do here, so I was thinking I could try and read. Maybe I'll play some video games with Melissa when she returns. Until then, why don't you stay with me?"

She walked to the couches, sat on the big one, and tapped on it to invite me to jump on it and lay by her side. After a moment of hesitation, I opted to accept, thinking I could just wait for Topa there and get some affection until she returned. Although I wouldn't have admitted it to the ninetails, I did enjoy Rakuen's company and the way she petted me. As she opened her book, I nested next to her,

pushing her with my shoulder, my head comfortable installed on her lap, in a surprisingly comfortable position after she deposited her hand on my forehead while holding her book. I even felt at ease, a lot more than when Agnes had tried comforting me after the houndour's death, and found myself enjoying the shy cuddle with the maid. Although she was mostly focused on her book, she was petting me from time to time, and for the first time since I had turned into a vulpix, I felt like there was someone I could get attached to.

Shortly after, Topa came back from the gardens with a small piece of wood in her muzzle. She found me cuddling with the reading maid but didn't comment on it and simply showed herself by our seat. As I saw her, I jumped from the couch, then waited for her as she took the time to get a few pets on the head.

"Don't overdo it," Rakuen said, thinking Topa and I were going to play. "Ruby's still recovering, so please don't exhaust her."

Topa nodded and we went back to the bowls of water. Following my instructions, she dropped the piece of wood in her bowl.

"Look," I said, poking the water to create waves again. "You can see that the wood only goes up and down. It doesn't move."

"That is surprising," Topa said, staring at my little experiment. "Thank you for showing me this. I like it!"

I wasn't sure what there was to like, but I felt relieved to know that I had just taught Topa something. Even if she proved to be more intelligent than me, I had all my human knowledge that gave me an edge over her.

"See, you can count how many times the piece of wood reaches its highest point, right? Well, the number of times it does per second is the frequency of the wave."

"I think I understand," Topa said. "So this applies to sound too? If it does, what does sound move? The water moves the piece of wood,

but..."

She wasn't too sure how to word her question, but I understood it anyway.

"Air," I replied. "Sound waves move air. Inside your ear is a very small hammer, that is moved from sound waves too, and that is how you can hear things."

"I admit I did not understand that part," Topa replied after a moment of hesitation. "How can air be moved?"

"That would be a bit too hard to explain," I said, not wanting to give it a try. "But... When you feel the wind on your body, that's air moving. Sound waves move air like waves move water, except... water moves up and down, and sound moves forward and backwards."

"How come I cannot feel the air moving from sounds, then? I can definitely feel the wind on my fur."

"Because their movements are extremely small and very fast. With wind, air moves massively, but with sound, it doesn't move much. See, waves have... two important parameters, I'll say. Frequency, which I explained earlier, and amplitude, which is basically... How high the piece of wood goes."

"Amplitude," she repeated, as if to try to learn the word. "So... the more amplitude the sound waves have, the more air moves, right?"

"That's correct."

"Does that mean that it can reach a point where I could feel sound waves on my fur?"

That was a good question.

"Probably," I replied with uncertainty. "But... You'd probably be deaf before that happens. For sounds, amplitude is called volume."

"Oh, I see! The more the air moves, the louder a sound is!"

"Yes!"

I was... happy. I had always enjoyed explaining things and teaching others, and I felt like I had just taught Topa something major that she had no idea about. She looked very excited and eager to learn more, and I could only share her enthusiasm.

"That is amazing!" she said, breaking the silence.

"Pardon?"

"Did you learn that in school? That is really amazing. Do humans know more about how the world works? How much do you yourself know? I want to learn more!"

"Well..." I replied, blushing. "Humans have entire jobs dedicated to trying to understand how the world works. As far as I am concerned... I don't know much compared to everything humans have figured out, but I used to study physics, so I would say I know a lot of things you would be curious to learn."

"Can you tell me more? What subjects do you know about?"

"Lots... I suppose. I have a lot of general knowledge, but I don't know many things in depth. I had only started learning about deeper physics before I..."

My throat clenched. Why was it so hard for me to talk about my transformation?

"I want to learn more," Topa repeated. "Please tell me more!"

"Later," I said, unwilling to explain more at the moment. "When we come across something I can explain, I'll try."

Although she sighed with disappointment, her enthusiasm didn't vanish, and we went to the pokemon sports room for me to keep

practising breathing fire.

"What about your other senses?" she asked on our way.

"The sense of smell is... different. I can't explain it, really. A human's nose is weak. Very weak."

"Did you get used to your new senses? Can you use them?"

"No," I replied bluntly. "I still have no idea what I'm smelling most of the time. I can hear things alright, but I can't locate them."

"Use your ears to do that," Topa said. "You have to move your ears to locate the sound. It is a bit hard to explain, but if you want, we can practise that."

"I... wouldn't mind," I admitted.

"For now, let us focus on firebreathing. You still need to be able to breathe fire with your muzzle open."

I spent the rest of the day practising firebreathing under Topa's careful eye. She seemed to be pretty satisfied with how I was improving, and before Agnes came back from college, I was finally able to breathe long streams of fire with my muzzle open. Unfortunately, I was unable to hold a stream of fire for too long, and my flames still felt rather weak, but Topa said it was fairly normal for my young age, and my flames would gain in power as I improved at fighting and aged up.

When Agnes came back from college, I was waiting for her in the main hall. I wanted to compare her scent to Rakuen's and figure out exactly why I enjoyed Rakuen's more.

"Hello Ruby," she said as I jumped on my hind legs to request to be in her arms.

She picked me up on my request and started petting me and chatting. While she talked, I spent time sniffing her, but I wasn't

listening. As expected, I enjoyed Rakuen's scent more, but in spite of my smelling her with insistence, I didn't understand why.

After petting me gently one last time, then petting Topa who had been patiently sitting by her side, she put me back on the floor and went to her room while I went to the couch where the maid was still sitting, playing a video game with Agnes' sister. Upon seeing me, Melissa grabbed me without asking me anything and put me on the couch, where I laid cuddling with Rakuen as I did earlier. Melissa petted me from time to time when her game allowed her to, looking at me with a pouty face, and I stayed there until dinner.

"The gardens?" I hazarded.

"Too vague!" Topa replied.

We were both in Topa's room, sitting on our respective pillow. Topa was making me listen to faint noises and try to guess where they came from.

"How can I give more precise directions if I don't even know what the gardens look like?"

"You have a point. Well then, just precise north, south, east or west!"

"How do I tell where north is?"

Topa stood up, turned around a few times, then raised her head a bit as if she were smelling something far away, and said:

"North is that way."

"How do you do that?"

"You can feel it," she said. "The same way you learnt about your inner flame. Trust your senses and let the vulpix part of you tell you."

As much as I disliked her cryptic way of saying it that made me feel like I was in some bad movie, what she said did make sense to me.

Unfortunately, in spite of all my efforts, I couldn't even hazard a guess and gave up.

"What about this one?" Topa asked.

Raising my ears, I could hear a faint noise that I identified as a critter walking through the grass. Moving both of my ears in different directions and listening to how it affected the sound, I noticed that the sound felt louder when my left ear was turned to the side of my body. My right ear didn't seem to change the sound much by moving, which meant it probably came from my left. Based on that and on what direction Topa identified as north, I hazarded a guess:

"South?"

"Correct," Topa said. "You should be able to locate the sounds more accurately, but this will have to do. The entrance of the manor and the gates face south. That is the properly maintained part of the garden, too. The northern part is part of the forest that extends far into the mountains, and it has been kept that way with minimal human intervention for pokemon to play in. There are a lot of critters and birds there, but a fence prevents most wild pokemon from getting in. Even without the gate, I doubt they would risk stepping into human territory. Some wild pokemon are scared of humans."

"How come?"

"It is natural. Were animals not scared of humans in your world too?"

"Well... yeah," I conceded. "But..."

I wasn't sure how to word my question and gave up on asking it.

"You talked about a stream of water," I remembered. "Where is it?"

"Why do you not tell me where it is?" Topa replied with a smile.

"Raise your ears and try to locate the water."

I obeyed, but had trouble locating it. I could hear the water alright, but it seemed to spread over a long distance, going from somewhere northeast, which I assumed to be the mountains, to southeast-east, where it gradually grew fainter until I couldn't hear it anymore. The water stream sounded loudest around northeast, where I assumed to have passed close to the house.

"Northeast?"

"That is where it is closest, yes. You are doing well!"

She continued testing me by making me locate different kinds of critters and owls that we could hear. The more I tried, the more accurate I became and the faster I could locate my target by moving my ears more efficiently. Unfortunately, all this required active effort on my end, and ideally, I should be able to do it automatically, but I was yet to reach that level of mastery. My body still felt very new to me, and although I was still learning to use it, I still felt like a stranger in it.

After I could locate critters properly, Topa made me track the movement of several guards and their growlithe, one at a time at first, then several at once. Following several sounds at once proved to be very difficult, but it was definitely doable, and after what felt like hours of effort, I finally was able to do it although still approximately. However, there was a new noise that caught my attention.

"Topa, what's that noise?"

She raised an ear herself, focusing deeply on the noise I was talking about. It sounded like metal moving, as if an animal was hitting the fence. After a few seconds of it, the sound stopped, and the gardens were filled with silence. Shortly after, the growlithe started barking, and guards began shouting orders at each other. Rapid footsteps resonated in the back gardens. They were closing in to the house.

"Topa, what's going on?" I asked, shivering.

"Do not worry," she said, walking up to me to cover me with her tails. "You will have to get used to those sounds and wake up to them. Do you remember what I said about thieves? This is one of them. The guards and growlithe will give chase until they catch the burglar."

After a few minutes of what sounded like a chase, the footsteps stopped momentarily, only to resume, still followed by the barks of growlithe and the shouts of guards. The voices surrounded the house, patrolling around it, searching the gardens.

"Topa?" I whispered.

It took me a moment to realize that I felt anxious. My heart was beating faster than it should, and despite Topa's tails covering my body, I felt immensely cold. I was staring at the door, expecting some kind of monster to appear at any moment, then jump at me to swallow me whole.

"Wait here," Topa said, standing up and walking to the door.

Before leaving, she turned to me, extremely serious.

"Hide. No matter what happens, do not come out. Do you hear me?"

I nodded. Topa's suddenly serious attitude had finished terrorizing me. As she was running to leave the door, I hid as I could, trembling in fear. Whatever was happening, I wasn't ready for it.

Chapter 11

After Topa left the room, I looked around, looking for a place I could hide in. Every time I passed the door, my temptation to exit to the room and go knock at Agnes' door until she let me in became more pressing, but I knew I was not allowed in the humans' bedrooms, and disturbing them in their sleep would probably have me in trouble, and the lack of proper hiding spots in Topa's room made it almost overwhelming. Short on solutions, I dragged her massive pillow to the angle of the walls bearing the door and the one on the left when entering and managed to stick the pillow in the corner, in a way that made it possible for me to sneak behind it, while the door would protect me from eyes at least for a moment. Shivering in fear, I crawled into my improvised shelter and waited, focusing entirely on the sounds I could hear.

A group of guards were patrolling around the gardens at a fast pace, probably looking for the intruder. Almost immediately after the chase began, some closed in to the house then stopped moving around where I estimated the main door was, guarding the entrance to make sure the thief would not get in. Uniforms ruffling and short barks echoed through the large garden, and a short silence followed. Immediately after, voices from the guards distorted their way into my ears, but were clear enough for me to reliably understand - they were giving Topa a rundown on the situation. The thief had broken in by climbing the fence and immediately been immediately given chase, but had been lost track of in the dense forest part of the garden. The guards had been making preparations to start tracking the burglar down with their growlthe and mentioned that Topa's intervention was not required and the thief would be caught swiftly, but Topa grunted with a hint of annoyance in here and simply ordered:

"Follow me."

That order was probably more for the growlithe than for the humans, and one of the guards, probably responsible for patrols, followed her. They went to the place I last heard the thief in, then became silent for a second, after which they started moving again. Walking slowly through the grass, they followed Topa as she requested, led to a place where they stopped completely and became suspiciously silent. It wasn't long until the guards began shouting orders for the intruder to surrender peacefully and climb down. After a few seconds of silence, a terrorized voice answered, saying that they were going to shoot him as soon as he was vulnerable and would rather be shot directly in his tree. Although the guards tried to reason with him, he did not seem to be willing to surrender, but his voice bore no signs of animosity - only terror. After a few minutes of unsuccessful talking, an annoyingly loud metallic loud resonated through the area. One of the guards had just cocked their gun.

"No," Topa barked.

There were a few seconds of silence, then an absurdly high-pitched, extremely unpleasant noise, so ear-splitting that I attempted to cover mine with my paws in an effort to reduce its intensity. Despite it being rather faint and the pillow I had slammed onto my head, it gave me a bad headache and numerous dizzy spells. Shortly after, the burglar emitted a short cry of pain, then a dull sound, followed by a much longer and louder scream. The guards instantly moved, rushing to the origin of the muffled bang, accompanied with a vaguely metallic noise - the thief was being handcuffed and taken away.

"Ruby?" Topa asked when she came back to the room.

Only mildly reassured, I moved from my shelter, still trembling in fear, although there was obviously no danger anymore - if there had ever been any. I was infinitely relieved to see Topa completely unharmed, still displaying her usual confident smile. I felt like I was about to break into tears when I rushed to her, burying my head between her front paws, my tails wagging violently.

"Hey!" she said, visibly surprised by my reaction. "I am fine. There was really no danger. The burglar was nothing more than a common thief, and he certainly did not expect to be given chase by any guards. He was quite scared when we found him in the tree."

"What happened?"

"He would not agree to come down. He thought the guards would shoot him."

"How did you get him down then? I heard him fall."

"Well... Since he would not cooperate, I used Confuse Ray to make him lose his grip on his branch, then Ember to make him lose balance and fall. You probably heard him shout when the Ember hit him, did you not?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, he did fall, but he was too confused to do anything to soften his fall and broke his arm."

"Huh? Is that not dangerous? Aren't you going to get in trouble?"

"Absolutely not! The thief is injured, but not fatally wounded at all. And this is a clear case of self-defense. This is not the first time a burglar has been injured when chased or captured."

"Okay."

After spending a minute trying to reassure me, Topa grabbed her pillow from my makeshift fort and put it back where it should have been, then laid on it.

"This has been a fairly eventful night," she said before yawning deeply. "How about resting?"

Although I went back to my own pillow to try to sleep, I was still too scared to really rest and spent an unrestful night listening to

whatever my ears could detect, expecting something else to break into the gardens.

The day after, as I was practising firebreathing again under Topa's careful guidance, I tried to question her about the events of the night.

"So... What exactly am I supposed to do when someone breaks into the gardens?"

"Nothing... Usually. The guards catch most burglars fast enough."

"But if they don't?"

"Well, considering your current state, I fear you may not be of much help. Once you recover from your wound and know more moves, you will be able to help."

I remained silent a few seconds, remembering how scared I was the night before despite being perfectly safe in Topa's room.

"I don't think I'd be of any help at all even then."

"Of course you will be! Any help is appreciated. I will tell you more when you are healed, but for now, I want you to focus on that... and firebreathing. Come on."

I continued practising, although my focus was elsewhere. I couldn't imagine myself chasing a human or doing anything that could actually help catch a burglar. I was scared of even the maids, so how would I hold myself together against someone who's clearly a foe?

By the end of the day, I could do everything Topa asked me to do with my fire, from throwing short bursts to holding a large flame in front of me, my muzzle wide open.

"Marvellous!" she said as I was laying down, exhausted from breathing so much fire all day. "You are good. It took you less than a week to be able to do this, but it took me a lot longer. Do you remember when you threw your first flame on Monday?"

"Yeah, but... It's no fair. I... The... The vulpix in me already knew how to do it. If anything, I should not have had to learn. I should have been able to do it instantly."

"You are not the vulpix in you," Topa said. "And even if what you say is true, then *you did* have to learn from... the vulpix in you, as you said. Either way, there is no way you should have been able to do it instantly after taking over your body. Humans do not breathe fire in your world, do they?"

"Of course not."

"Well then! You should be proud of yourself."

I knew I should be, but a part of me was still embarrassed and shameful, as if I did not deserve the praise. I felt like a parasite taking over another animal's body and controlling it, like those larvae that entered people's heads through the ear canal before spreading around their brains and stealing their bodies in a series of books I remembered reading. I wasn't even sure there actually was a "vulpix part of me", as if the vulpix whose body I shamelessly stole was still there in her brain with me. Wouldn't I have been able to notice if there were someone else in my head? Would the vulpix not have tried to communicate with me, if only to recover access to her body, or give me information? Did she resent me?

What if there was no vulpix part of me? How had I been able to breathe fire and control my senses even though my human brain would have been completely unable to do it? What exactly was the role of the brain, in this case? I was obvious I did have a vulpix's brain, but what exactly did that imply? I could control the brain, at least to some extent, or I would not be able to control my body at all, but could the brain control me in return? Was that why I sometimes acted naturally for a vulpix, but felt embarrassment and shame afterwards? Would the original vulpix's brain eventually take over me? Would I disappear?

"Say, Topa..." I hazarded, still unsure how to word my question.

"Yes?"

"I... I was wondering. Is there really a... vulpix part of me... I mean..."

I tried to explain to her my thoughts about the vulpix's brain controlling me at times, but I must have worded my explanation poorly, as she did not seem to understand. I tried to explain again:

"Well... My body belonged to a vulpix who died, right?"

"From what we know, it seems correct, indeed."

"Then what happened to her? And I'm not asking about what happens after death, but I mean... This is her body. Shouldn't she be... Somewhere with me... in it?"

"If she died, then I do not believe she was going to use her body much anymore."

"What do pokemon think about death?"

"Nothing," Topa replied after a short hesitation. "When we die, we die. End of the journey. There is not much to think about it though, is there?"

"Well... It brings questions that are impossible to answer. What is consciousness, for example. See, we know a lot about our bodies, we know how it works, we know how the brain communicates with the limbs, but... We have no idea what consciousness is. Are trees conscious? Is every living organism conscious? Is there a consciousness above all? Evolution for example, does it happen randomly is there an unknown purpose?"

"Hold on, you lost me. I do not know what evolution is, if you are not referring to pokemon evolving. Also, I was not aware that trees were living creatures."

"Well, not exactly creatures, but... They are alive. It's... it's hard to explain. And honestly, I'm not sure exactly how life is defined anyway."

"Let us forget that part then. Do humans have theories about consciousness?"

"Science doesn't. Religions... I'm not sure. But there are people who talk about souls or spirits and say that they are the bearers of consciousness. And when a body dies, the soul escapes, then depending on your religion, it goes to heaven or hell or reincarnates or whatever."

Topa's eyes lost themselves into nothing.

"If we assume that souls do exist and do carry... consciousness... Then I believe we have our answer! The vulpix died, her soul escaped her body, and you took it over. That can even explain why you survived death and started breathing again!"

"But then... I had to be a soul myself. And in that case... I was dead?"

Topa's eyes widened as she realized what exactly her hypothesis implied. She apologised to me, but I wasn't listening. I was dead? My human body was dead? Why? When?

"Ruby?"

Topa saw the distress in my eyes as I was trying to guess how exactly I had died. She hugged me, but short on words, said nothing until I calmed down, remembering that we were only trying to understand what happened, and we were not certain that my original body was indeed dead.

Shortly after, Agnes burst into the training room, asking me to follow her in a strange tone, mix of sorrow and anger. She led me to the TV room, where she had been watching the news, and sat me on the

couch next to her. Topa joined us right after, and I instantly recognized the pokemon centre and the journalist that had been allowed into my room. As Topa and I laid on the big couch, the interview recorded with Nurse Joy was playing.

"I thought you'd want to watch this," Agnes said, her voice wavering with anger.

After Nurse Joy was done talking, the picture shifted to the video that was recorded of me.

All I could see was a little fox with brown fur. Its paws were, as expected, of a darker shade of brown, and the tails were a somewhat unnatural shade of orange, mirrored by a small patch of swirling fur at the top of its head, and contrasting beautifully with the off-white of its belly. Below its torso was a gigantic bandage, under which some fur was still tainted red from the blood. With its small body, large legs, and big head, it looked like a cub, staring at the recorder with angry eyes. Its small frame was exaggerated by how scrawny it was and how matte its fur had become. The vulpix clearly had some trouble breathing, and was very unhappy with being disturbed by the journalists.

It took me a second to realize that the fox I was seeing was none other than me. Fortunately for me, I had no time to dwell in my usual depressive state whenever I was reminded of my situation, for the TV switched back to the journalist standing in front of the hospital and explaining the situation:

"The vulpix you just saw is the eighth known victim of the serial killer that has been striking irregularly for a few years now, and the only survivor. Police investigations are still ongoing, and so far, it has been discovered that the murderer only targets fire-type pokemon that are likely to be used by the police. Whether this is the vengeance of a maniac or a protest against local authorities remains unknown, as do the motives behind the crimes."

The image shifted to that of a fairly old man, accompanied with a noble Absol, who seemed to be the commissioner, and was giving a bit of detail about the case. Topa and I exchanged concerned looks.

"The vulpix is now in good health and has been adopted by the Trokair family," the journalist finished. "We advise all trainers who own a fire-type pokemon to be particularly careful when out, and we hope that the police will catch this murderer soon."

Agnes switched the TV off. She was fulminating.

"Did they need to give my name?" she roared, standing up. "What pests! Can't they just leave people alone for crying out loud? Do they need to stir up every little bit of drama they can get their god damn claws on?"

I put my head against her leg in an attempt to calm her down.

"Sorry, Ruby," she said, picking me up to cuddle. "I just can't stand it. You don't need all that unnecessary attention."

Agnes went on a rant against journalists, but I wasn't listening. Looking at Topa, I realised we had the same thing in mind, but even after going to bed and on our respective pillows, we didn't talk about it.

I was woken up early the day after, despite it being a Saturday, by none other than Agnes herself. Topa didn't seem to mind being woken up and, as usual, felt like she'd been awake for hours just a minute after standing up, but I was still too sleepy and wanted to go back to my pillow.

"No, no," Agnes said, concealing her amusement at my desperate attempts to hold onto my bed. "We are going to the pokemon centre for a follow-up on your recovery today, and you need to be clean and pretty for it! The appointment is around noon, so we have time. Let's have breakfast first!"

She carried me to the kitchens, frequently poking my muzzle with her finger to stop me from falling back asleep. It was a bit annoying to have my snout touched so regularly, but I couldn't help but feel amused by it, and Agnes' arms were so comfortable that they enhanced my exhaustion and I had neither the will nor the energy to defend myself. Agnes seemed to have a bit of fun as well, as she was silently smiling while gently keeping me awake.

After we were done eating, preparations were made to wash me. I didn't have the feeling that I was particularly filthy, and Topa seemed to agree, but Agnes insisted. As she was preparing the bathroom part of Topa's room, a maid walked in that I instantly recognized Rakuen, who seemed to be excited. Agnes put me on the floor and quietly left the room.

"Hey Ruby," she said when I peeked inside the bathtub. "Since I'm the maid who's been assigned to you, I'll be the one helping Agnes wash you. We'll try not to let any water onto the bandages, but overall it might not be a very pleasant experience for you. Try to stay still, okay? The less you struggle the shorter it will be!"

I wasn't very happy with Rakuen's warning that being washed might be unpleasant, but she had a point: if I stood still and cooperated, it wouldn't last too long. Maybe I would even get a treat for behaving well.

After she was done aligning products by the bathtub, among which I only recognized a shampoo apparently designed for foxes, Rakuen spent some time petting me before Agnes joined us. She had some sort of plastic sheet with her.

"Hello Rakuen," she said, finally noticing the maid.

"Hello Agnes," the maid replied, stepping backwards to give Agnes access to me.

"Ruby, we're going to use this to avoid having water on your bandages and, more importantly, on your wound. I'm going to wrap

this around your belly. It might be uncomfortable, but it's necessary. Can you stand?"

As she requested, I stood up, and she started wrapping the plastic sheet around my belly. She made it very tight at the borders of the bandage, which indeed felt uncomfortable, but didn't tighten it otherwise, not applying unnecessary pressure on my wound. The plastic sheet was pressuring my bladder, which made me feel like I needed to relieve myself, and the bottom of my ribcage, but overall I could deal with that easily.

"Alright," Agnes said, putting on a pair of surgical gloves and giving one to Rakuen. "Let's go."

I was carefully lifted then placed in the bathtub. Agnes asked me to stay still and warned that she would spray me with water, starting with my tails and hind legs.

My first reaction as the water came into contact with my rear was to jolt forward and try to turn around, but Agnes stopped me with one hand. I took a step back to place myself back where I was before jumping forward and closed my eyes, clenching my teeth to support it as they were washing me. I could feel them touch my tails and that made me extremely embarrassed. They were waving around as if to try to dodge the hands against my will, making it worse for me as I didn't know how to stop them. Once they were drenched in water, my tails felt extremely heavy and finally stopped moving, resting on the bathtub after the humans were done washing them.

"Close your eyes, Ruby," Agnes asked gently.

I already was closing them, but I wasn't ready for what came next - water started flowing at the top of my head, startling me again. It was comfortably warm, but having water on my head made me feel like it was hard to breathe. I was only breathing by bursts. Agnes and Rakuen washed my head as fast as they could, carefully avoiding putting water into my ears, then approximately dried it with a towel

so I could breathe more freely. They finished washing my chest and front paws before turning the hose off.

"Okay," Agnes said. "Time to dry you."

I shook my whole body to try to get rid of the water that was stuck in my fur, which was apparently expected as both Agnes and Rakuen protected themselves with towels, which they then used to help dry me. After that was done, Agnes was given a blow dryer to finish it while Rakuen put the products they used back in cupboards. Topa came back to the room right as Agnes turned off the blow dryer.

"There!" Agnes said, picking me up and looking at me. "You look so cute! Look."

She carried me to the mirror and showed it to me.

I looked adorable. Compared to what I had seen the day before from the recording at the pokemon centre, I was significantly healthier and definitely cuter. My fur was a lot shinier, fluffier, and cleaner, as traces of blood on my belly were gone. Unfortunately, the bandage wasn't, and I didn't get to see the scar that I would bear for the rest of my life. Opening and closing my paws, I took a look at my claws from the mirror. I had a hard time believe that the little fox I was seeing was actually me.

"You look a lot better!" Topa said once Agnes put me down.

"Huh... thanks."

"I insist!" she said, visibly trying to make me feel better. "You look very cute. And healthier."

She closed in to me to sniff at my fur.

"This is the same shampoo they use for me," she noticed. "There are other products too though, but I do not know what they are for."

I shrugged. It didn't matter anyway, those were details I didn't need to know. I wasn't the one responsible for washing myself anymore, so why bother trying to understand what the products did?

"How does it feel to be clean? If I remember correctly, you have not been washed since you left the pokemon centre."

"Yeah," I replied. "It feels... nice? I mean... I'm so fluffy. I didn't think I'd have so much fur."

"Your fur is not that long, remember that we are still in summer. When you have your winter coat, you will be surprised by how fluffy you are!"

"Yeah... Still, that wasn't pleasant. I don't like being touched."

"You do not? I rather enjoy being washed. Think of it like being petted, but it lasts longer, and you smell and look good afterwards!"

"I don't like it," I said, pouting. "They touched my... my butt. And my tails. I hated it when they touched my tails. It was... Embarrassing. It's like my tails are... private. I don't want people to touch them."

"I can understand," Topa replied. "I do not like having my tails touched either. In fact, as far as I know, pokemon and animals altogether loathe that. Humans have a legend that says touching a ninetales' tails lays a curse on them that lasts a thousand years. In reality, that is just because a ninetales is likely to attack if you touch their tails without them allowing you to. Since ninetales is known to have ghost and sometimes psychic powers, humans assume they become cursed, but they really just are under the effect of Confuse Ray."

"Sometimes? I thought all vulpix and ninetales had psychic powers."

"They do not!" Topa replied, smiling. "For example, I do not have any psychic powers. However, every vulpix is capable of ghost-type moves. The one I listed is among them."

"What do they do? I mean... I have an idea of what Confuse Ray might do because of the games in my world, but... I don't know how it actually works."

"Well... Confuse Ray is a control move. The unpower version messes with your target's ability to control their powers. If they are not too strong, their own powers will attack them instead of attacking you. If it happens to you, it feels like an explosion. When you are trying to gather your powers for a move, they just explode at you instead."

"Gather?"

"I will explain that more in detail when I start teaching you Ember."

"Okay... What does the real version do then?"

"Confuses the brain. I am not sure how it works exactly, but your movements become approximative. As if you were... drunk, I suppose."

"That sounds horrible," I said. "Is there a way to get out of it?"

"It goes away with time. If you are talking about the unpower one, then it takes focus to get rid of it."

"Are you going to teach me Confuse Ray too?"

"If you want! I can teach you all moves that I know, but we have to start with the easy ones. Ember is a start."

I nodded, hoping that she would start with that soon. I knew how to breathe fire now, and she promised she'd teach me to use my unpowers as soon as I did. I felt impatient, as if my new life was slowly unrolling to make sense. Although I still wasn't quite aware what my role would be as a police pokemon, I was certain that being able to fight would be of paramount importance, and I couldn't wait to learn.

Chapter 12

"Are you ready to go the pokemon centre?" Agnes asked as she returned from her room.

She was wearing a really nice summer dress of a pale blue colour. The casual attire was a shock to me, as I was more used to the formal shirt and pants she wore when she went to police school, and had not expected she could look this pretty and this feminine considering how much of a tomboy she was otherwise, especially with her hair in a ponytail. This time, she had left it untied, flowing freely to the bottom of her shoulders, her forehead covered in a simple sideways fringe. Her only accessory was a small dark blue purse strapped over her neck, a few sheets of paper trying to poke out of it.

Once the shock of her completely different look faded, I turned towards her and nodded. As she picked me up, a pleasant smell of a feminine perfume gently caressed my sensitive muzzle, and I turned to Topa to check her reaction to it. She was laying quietly on her pillow, her eyes riveted on me, but they didn't seem happy - there was a layer of sadness or melancholy in them that I couldn't quite decrypt. Worried, I tried to push myself over my trainer's shoulder to get her attention:

"Topa!"

"Shhh," Agnes said, scratching my head as if to comfort me. "Melissa is still sleeping, try not to wake her up. Don't worry, it shouldn't last too long. It's just a few follow-up tests to make sure everything's alright."

She adjusted my position on her shoulder to allow me to see the ninetales, and I realised that she thought I didn't want to leave Topa, which wasn't too far from the truth. I didn't really want to go back to the pokemon centre either, although my short trip there wasn't all

that bad, considering the situation I was in - most of the nurses had been really kind to me, and I would probably rejoice to see them again, but I didn't want to stay there for too long.

Once again, I was put in a cage when we reached the car. I could smell the unidentified vulpix odours again, but I could finally identify one of them - the strongest one - as Topa's, which meant there were still two faint odours left: one male vulpix and one female. I could smell the differences in the odours, and compare them to what I knew of Topa and my own, but I was still unable to exactly tell what was what. From what I understood, the odours being fainter meant that they both had not been in the cage for a long time - even longer than Topa. Since she was the only ninetales in the house, it was safe to assume that both other odours were gone - dead, missing, or given away. I was also certain that they were all vulpix, since the cage was probably too small for Topa, but that raised more questions. The female odour was the faintest, so faint that I could only catch glimpses of it. Did the vulpix it belonged to evolve long ago? Then, what about the male one? Did he evolve too? How could I tell? All I knew for certain is that there used to be two other vulpix in the house, but I had no idea when, and I had no way to know what happened to them.

The road towards the pokemon centre was shorter than I remembered - probably because I was focused on the odours trying to figure out what they were. It was a massive relief for me to be liberated from the cage, but I had a weird feeling seeing the pokemon centre from the front. It was a huge building, much bigger than I remembered hospitals to be. All I remembered of the way between the car and the centre was clumsily walking from the latter to the former, and now I was walking the same path in the other direction. Although my steps were more confident and my belly less painful, I had the disturbing feeling that I was going back there to be stuck in it again, as if walking that path meant I was going to undo all the progress I had made in the past week. This was my fourteenth day as a vulpix, a Saturday, and I had left the hospital on a Sunday, the beginning of my eighth day. I couldn't help but think there was

some significant symbolism in this event and the weird way in which the dates seemed to match.

As we stepped into the building, I was taken by a strong wave of fear. Everyone was going to stare me, recognizing me from that stupid news interview, and because my leaving the pokemon centre but a week ago seemed to have been a big event, judging by how many people had gathered to bid me farewell. I was reluctant to go in, but the presence of Agnes by my side made me feel better, and I expected her to shield me should anything happen - or protect me from everyone's eyes if it came to that.

Happily disappointed to realize that my entrance was completely unnoticed, I sighed in relief, for I would not have to deal with all the curious looks from people around me. A few nurses noticed me from afar, but they gave me a quick nod as a greeting and carried on their activities instead of coming to me.

"Hello, Agnes," the receptionist said. "Coming for the check-in for your vulpix?"

"Yup," Agnes confirmed, taking the papers out of her purse. "I brought those, since I couldn't do it before."

"Marvellous," the nurse said, taking the papers from Agnes. "Let's see... Ruby, heh? That is a great name."

She skimmed over the papers, checking their contents.

"Everything looks fine. If you would please take a seat, Nurse Joy will be available shortly."

Agnes followed the order and sat on a chair in an adjacent room, inviting me to either sit by her side or jump on her lap. Reluctant to move, I hesitated, unsure how high I could jump and scared of my belly becoming painful, and Agnes opted to carefully picking me up when she understood my hesitation, then put me on her lap and started petting me, much to my enjoyment.

After a fairly long wait, Nurse Joy walked up to us and greeted us with a smile. My tails began wagging when I noticed her, and she happily petted me on the head.

"Hey you," she said after greeting Agnes properly, turning her attention to me. "I'm glad to see you're doing well. My, you look so much better now! Have you been giving her the medication?"

"Yup," Agnes confirmed. "I've been mixing it with her food. She's never complained, so I assume she doesn't mind."

She looked at me as if to have my support, and I joyfully nodded. Internally however, I was upset and disgusted to my stomach. Agnes had been hiding meds in my food and I never noticed. The realisation I had been played with and failed to notice made me feel weak. Did Topa know? If she did, why did she not tell me?

"If you would please follow me," Nurse Joy said, "let's start with the exams."

She led me to a room that looked nothing like the one I was in after waking up. It was smaller and less isolated. From the bed I was put on, I could hear nurses, humans, and pokemon in other rooms. The whole pokemon centre sounded a lot busier than I remembered.

Agnes was allowed to stay with me as Nurse Joy drew some blood.

"We're going to test her for infections," she said. "Pokemon have a much stronger immune system than humans, but she is still at risk. The abdominal cavity is a sterile part of the body, and her wound might have brought bacteria in. We drained all we could before stitching her up, but it's best to check again. Judging by her fur though, I think she's completely fine."

The blood sample was given to another nurse, who hurried out of the room, probably to test it for infections. Nurse Joy then pulled a weird machine from a corner of the room.

"This is an ultrasound machine," she said. "I'm going to check for internal damage, and to make sure organs and muscle are repairing properly. Let's take off this evil bandage now."

That last order was directed at me, laying on the bed. Following a silent instruction from Agnes, I stood up, and nurse Joy started undoing the bandage. Putting it aside, she grabbed a little flashlight and started inspecting the wound. Her touching my belly gave me shivers, and I was expecting to be in great pain at any moment just from the contact of her fingers on the scar.

"Don't worry," nurse Joy said, feeling I was tense. "It won't hurt."

As she continued carefully scouting the scar, she commented out loud, more for Agnes than for herself:

"The flesh seems to have been healing properly. The scar tissue is easily visible, but of a proper colour. Fur is growing again around it, but there will always be this little hole in it."

She turned to Agnes, suggesting she take a look at it as well. She reluctantly agreed, but seemed to be relieved by what she saw.

"I'm going to push on your belly a bit, Ruby," Nurse Joy said. "It will be uncomfortable, so please don't bite me."

I nodded, clenching my teeth. She gently pushed on several places around the wound, which felt very uncomfortable as she warned me, but it was not painful. Keeping that part of the exam as short as she could, she switched her flashlight off and petted me.

"This is looking good," she said. "She's recovering very well."

She pushed me on the shoulder to ask me to lay down, and I quietly obeyed, laying on my back as Agnes stepped forward to hold me in position. My entire body tensed up as I realised I was being held against me will and I began feeling vulnerable and in danger.

Fortunately, the ultrasound didn't last long, and I was allowed to rest on my left side, facing my trainer.

"Good," Nurse Joy said as only comment.

She left the room, saying she'd be back with the blood test results. Agnes and I were now alone, waiting.

I wanted to try looking at my belly to see the scar, but at the same time, I was terrified. I remembered oh too well what was said about it, and the additional information Nurse Joy told me made it even scarier. I was still morbidly curious and I really wanted to know what kind of scar I would bear for the rest of my new life, but the idea of seeing it was too scary and I made it a point not to look in the direction of the rest of my body.

"Were you happy to see Nurse Joy again?" Agnes asked, breaking the silence.

I stared at her, surprised. There was something sad in her voice - some sort of disappointment, mixed with a bit of jealousy. I wasn't sure what to answer.

"She's really kind," Agnes said. "She's the head of the centre, yet she took on her time to take care of you herself. Did you know she is not actually a nurse, but a doctor? Nurse Joy is a title given to the directors of pokemon centres. I don't even know her real name."

I was glad to notice that my hypothesis about the pink hair and the Nurse Joy name was right, but I knew something was off. Agnes was clearly speaking to me, yet she didn't seem to make sure I was paying any attention. She was staring at the void, vomiting sentences in a lifeless voice, contrasting violently with her usual joyful and smiling self.

I poked her with my left front leg, trying to get her attention. Jolting surreptitiously as if I was waking her up from a dream, she peeked at me and forced a smile.

I forced my tails to wag as she started petting me, which lit her gloomy face with a shy smile. When she tried to take her hand away, I grabbed it with both front paws, requesting to be petted more, and emitted a quiet bark I tried to make needy. She displayed another smile - a more truthful one, this time, and obliged. As she was petting me, I made my tails wag progressively slower, closing my eyes more and more rapidly, until I stopped moving altogether, pretending to be asleep, still holding Agnes' hand between my paws.

Why was I not happy? My wound was healing well, the nurse that had been taking care of me and whom I liked a lot was again checking on my health, and although I was once more on a hospital bed, I was no longer alone, and I even had my human with me who was petting me. Aside from the transformation, I had nothing to be sad about, yet I felt very unhappy. Agnes' hand was resting on my head, for she was unwilling to remove it after I grabbed it so fiercely, but she didn't seem to be very happy either. The atmosphere in my room was heavy and dark, as if the ceiling lights had been dimmed to accompany Agnes' feelings.

Why was Agnes not happy? What did that question about Nurse Joy mean? Why was she acting so weirdly gloomy?

I didn't have time to think about it, as Nurse Joy came back with the blood test results and Agnes gently shook me to wake me up, unaware that I had not been sleeping. Once again, my tails started wagging against my will when I saw the pink hair in spite of my efforts to stop them, and Agnes let out another disappointed sigh.

"Everything is fine," the doctor said with a smile. "There are no infections."

"That's a relief," Agnes said.

I wasn't sure whether or not she was being truthful. There was a weird tone in her voice.

"I have a few instructions to give you," Nurse Joy added. "She's doing better, but she's not fully healed yet. I would advise against any kind of strenuous activities like battling or wrestling. You should walk her regularly to keep her healthy, although it might tire her quickly, but no running, jumping or fighting of any sort. You can start allowing those when she shows signs of being more energetic, in around a week if her recovery keeps going well. I will bandage her belly again for safety, but there is little risk of infections now, so it is not necessary. You can take it off to wash her wound but be careful not to expose it to water too long. You don't want the incision getting wet. Also, no bathing or swimming at all until her recovery is complete. Going outside is fine, but have someone watch her at all times."

"Understood," Agnes said, recovering her naturally confident voice. "Shall we take an appointment for the final check-up?"

"Yes, that is a good idea. Let's say... two weeks. Friday the fifteenth?"

"That works," Agnes said. "My vacation starts today, so I'll be free for a whole month. Classes resume in July."

What kind of weird class schedule was that? A whole month off at a time right before summer vacation?

"Oh," Nurse Joy said as if she had forgotten Agnes was still a student. "Second half of the year?"

"Yup. That is when we start lessons with and for pokemon."

"She will have recovered by then," Nurse Joy said as if to reassure Agnes. "She might still be weak, but she'll be able to attend. I'll write a letter to your school with instructions."

I stopped paying attention to anything past that point. So that was what was going to happen to me, and in a short time - classes. In a way, the idea that I would be a student again felt comfortably

relieving, for I used to be a student before my life changed completely, but I was worried about what I was going to do. I was no science student anymore - I was but a mere police dog and would be trained as such. On top of that, even in my world, I had no idea what police dogs actually did, so I was walking straight into unknown territory. My leisure days excused by my recovery were soon to be over, and my actual new life was just about to start.

"July, you said?" Topa repeated when I reported the conversation to her. "That is in a month pretty exactly. You will have time to heal."

"I'm not worried about that!" I almost shouted, clearly agitated. "I don't know Ember. I don't know how to fight. I don't know anything!"

"And that makes you worried other pokemon might find out you are a human. Do not worry. I trust you will be able to use Ember way before the classes resume."

"I don't want to be a police dog."

"Well, if anything, you would be a police fox."

I stared at Topa with murderous eyes.

"Being a police officer is not the source of your worry," she said. "I have said that already, but you need to..."

"... stop worrying about others finding out I'm a human", I finished, interrupting her. "I know. You keep saying that. How could I not worry about it? Do you know what they would do to me if they knew?"

"No," Topa replied bluntly. "Do you?"

Her unexpected sharp answer shut me right up.

"I will say this one last time. Worrying about things that may happen outside your control is only hurting you. You do not even know what would happen, yet you spend great amounts of times imagining the worst situations. While I agree that it is good to have plans in case

something goes wrong, this implies one thing, and an important one: it implies you did have a plan in the first place, and you do not. You are trying to imagine bad things happening to you and base your estimation of the future on them. That is counter-productive and only leads to pain. Make yourself a plan, act according to it - only then can we start trying to expect the unexpected. Without a plan, everything is unexpected, and you are wasting your time."

I wasn't sure I understood what she meant exactly, but she had a point. I needed a plan.

"Okay," I conceded. "I don't have a plan. But I know that I need to learn Ember if I want to get anywhere, regardless of whether or not other pokemon find out about me."

"That is true, but you cannot base your ideas of how things can go wrong solely on that. You are using the fact you do not know Ember to hurt yourself. I will teach you Ember. We have a month for that, and the nurse allowed you to exercise lightly. We will not engage in any fighting or wrestling, but using moves should be enough. After all, you have been practicing firebreathing for a while now and it did not seem to affect your health, despite being quite exhausting."

I nodded. I was very impatient to learn Ember, but that wasn't because I didn't want to be found out. I wanted to learn it because I was interested in pokemon battles, especially knowing that they were actually not physically dangerous and were nothing more than a sport. Now that I was a pokemon, a whole new world was opening before me, and Ember would be my first step into it.

"Is there something else on your mind?" Topa asked after we ate and were laying on our respective pillows.

"No," I said without thinking. "Why?"

"You smell upset."

"I... what?"

"You smell upset," she repeated. "Emotions affect the way people smell, and that is true for animals and pokemon. You will learn to detect that, too."

"Oh. Yeah, that's because of hormones I suppose."

"Hormones?"

"Ugh..."

I didn't feel like trying to explain that and didn't even try. It wasn't a subject I was particularly knowledgeable about, and I didn't want to inevitably run into a question I would be unable to answer. I valued my knowledge a lot now that I was a vulpix, as it made me feel still human, for Topa despite her great intelligence did not enjoy as vast knowledge as me.

"Actually..." I said, trying to remember what could have upset me. "It's not me. It's... Agnes."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. We were waiting in the pokemon center, then Nurse Joy came to ask us to go in a room, and since that, Agnes has been acting gloomy. Something's off and I don't know what."

"Did anything unusual happen?"

"No? At least... not that I noticed. I was on her lap, she was petting me, then Nurse Joy showed up and..."

I paused for a short moment, wondering if I was right.

"And?"

"My... my tails started wagging."

Even then, two weeks after being turned into a vulpix, it felt weird to talk about my tails, muzzle or paws. I had trouble imagining them as

mine.

"Do you mean you wagged your tails? That is perfectly normal, it is a reaction to show content. Is that unusual?"

"No," I corrected. "My tails started wagging. I had no control over them, and I couldn't stop them from doing that when I tried to."

"That is normal," Topa repeated. "It means you were happy to see Nurse Joy. Though... I fail to understand how that is related to Agnes."

"Well, I... my tails never wagged for Agnes. Even when she was petting me. Even when we were in the room waiting for the blood test results. It's like... I'm happier around Nurse Joy than I am around Agnes. And... I think she noticed and it hurt her."

Topa remained silent a few seconds.

"That makes sense," she agreed. "You are her pokemon. Seeing you happier with someone else... That would make her doubt her choice to keep you, would it not? She probably wonders if you would not be happier with Nurse Joy and if she made a mistake by taking you with her. Maybe... she even feels like you do not love her."

"I do love her!" I protested with all my might.

I blushed and looked away, embarrassed by my own reaction. Topa smiled.

"I believe you. But... there is a reason why you do not seem happy around Agnes. Not wagging your tails around her is not a big problem, but you two barely interact, so that is the only way she has to know whether or not you love her, and... you did not show that you do. I think that is the reason why she became upset. She envies Nurse Joy and the love you have for her."

"So she's jealous?"

"No," Topa said. "She is envious. She loves you, especially after what you have been through. However... she does not know if you do love her. All she knows is you love Nurse Joy. That has to be a pretty big hit on her, I think."

"Then all I need to do is wag my tails around her?"

"It is not so easy," Topa replied, clearly amused by my candid reaction. "There is... something. Between Agnes and you. Something that makes you upset just as much as she is. I have no idea what it may be, but it is there, and it is a wall between you and her that you need to break."

"How do I figure out what it is? I have no idea what it may be."

"Start from the beginning?" Topa suggested. "The earliest memory you have of Agnes. It could be anything. I do not think I can help you with that, but if you want me to, I will do my best."

I remained silent. I didn't think she would be able to help at all - this was between Agnes and I. Something that could have upset me? Something I resented her for? I couldn't remember anything she did to me that could have made me upset. Whatever it was, it had to be something small, a detail that I missed but somehow impacted me greatly, maybe something she herself did not remember.

I felt guilty. I had upset my trainer and I didn't even realise it. Worse, I didn't even know how. I felt like I was a terrible person, a violent treacherous evildoer that did not deserve the care of someone as loving and kind as Agnes, or the mentoring of someone like Topa. I was just a little scum, full of herself and unaware of the consequences of her actions on others. I was a terrible pet.

A terrible pet? Was that really my first thought? A pet? Not a friend?

I looked at Topa, who was busy grooming her tails, seeking support. Unwilling to disturb her with my problems, I kept my thoughts to myself.

I had fallen low. I had fallen so low that I thought of myself not as a person, a fox, a vulpix or a friend, but a pet. All my early worries about having to obey orders, being restrained in my movement, and all the possibly bad things that came with being a pet seemed to have slipped off my mind. Was I now fine with being a pet? Was I really fine with that fate? What happened to my human ideals of freedom and basic rights, those very rights I thought were taken from me merely by being a pet?

"Ruby," Topa said, worried.

"Sorry," I apologized, knowing she was going to ask me what was going on. "I... I don't want to bother you with what I'm thinking right now. I know what you're going to say. It's... It's something I have to deal with myself."

"You should not let Agnes' upset feelings bring you down so much. Take some rest, sleep on it, and you will think more clearly tomorrow."

I concealed a smug smile, feeling inappropriately vain about the fact she failed to understand what was going on in my head.

"You should sleep. Now that I know you are allowed to exercise a bit, I will show you around the gardens tomorrow. And... I will start teaching you Ember."

Chapter 13

Despite the exciting prospect of finally learning Ember, I felt void of energy. When I woke up, I couldn't bring myself to open my eyes and sighed deeply, hoping I could just sleep through the entire day. I didn't want to get up, get out of the room, or do anything. I just wanted to stay where I was, alone, my eyes closed and dreaming of the days I was still human, before my life took a turn for the worse and I became stuck in this damaged body with no family and no future. Everything I could have done to start improving my situation would take immense amounts of effort - effort I would clearly not be able to make.

Of course, Topa was going to try to push me to do things, but for what? There was no point. I knew I wouldn't be able to learn Ember. I knew I wouldn't be able to fight or wrestle, even if I were not still recovering from the wound I had unfairly inherited with this body. I was physically too weak to be any useful as a police dog. I didn't even know how to fight or detect scents. I was probably even way too young to be trained. Why bother with anything when my entire life was clearly acting against me?

"Hey Ruby," Topa said when she noticed I was awake.

"Hi," I replied without any enthusiasm.

She didn't seem to notice and simply continued:

"I will carry you downstairs to eat, then we can go to the practice room so I can start teaching you Ember."

"I don't want to eat," I replied. "I'm not hungry."

"Oh. That is odd, but I imagine the medical exam cut through your appetite. I am hungry, though, so I will go eat then we can meet in

the practice room to start practising Ember. If you change your mind, please call me."

I didn't reply to that. Likely expecting a reply, she stayed in place for a few seconds, staring at me, but eventually shrugged and left her room. When she left, I sighed again, adjusting my position to face the wall, and closed my eyes with the hopes of falling back asleep. Of course, I was wide awake and absolutely not sleepy, but I just didn't feel like doing anything.

Topa came back an abnormally long time afterwards.

"Ruby, why are you still here? I thought we were going to the practice room."

"Huh... I don't feel like practising today. I'm tired."

That was a fat lie, and Topa understood rapidly.

"Are you sure you are alright?"

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not."

Topa walked around me, poking me regularly with her muzzle to try to get me to move, but my resolve to simply stay in place was stronger than her playful invitations.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked, worried. "You smell sad."

"I'm fine," I repeated, pushing her away with one of my back legs. "I feel tired. I'd like to just rest today."

"If you are tired, it might be because you are hungry. Come down and eat."

"I'm not hungry. Just let me rest."

I refused to talk after that, closing my eyes as if that gave me any shelter against her attempts at making me move. She kept insisting for a short moment, then left.

I knew she was right. I knew I was upset, but I didn't know why. All I could was hope the day would pass fast and I'd feel better the day after, even though there was no reason to. The only way I'd get better would be to get a hold of myself and make the effort necessary to make myself better, but I knew I would be unable to do it. If my fate was to be depressed, then I had accepted it.

After what felt like a few hours waiting, hurried footsteps resonated on the wooden stairs and rushed towards Topa's room. Frowning in worry and slightly short of breath, Agnes appeared at the door, staring immediately at me. She switched the lights on and instantly came to me, closely followed by Melissa.

"Ruby?" she asked, kneeling by my side to pet me.

I watched her come to me in slow motion. I could see every detail of her movements, every strand of hair moving, every muscle twitching, and through the whole event, I was entirely focused on my tails. I expected them to start wagging, just like they wagged when I saw Nurse Joy. Yet, when Agnes started kneeling down, they were still immobile, once again not doing what I wanted. By the time she was in position and stretched an arm to pet me, I had lost all hope. They wouldn't move.

I tried forcing them to move, but even that seemed to be way beyond my power. All I did was let out a deep sigh and close my eyes again, ignoring the friendly hand trying to comfort me.

"What's wrong?" Melissa asked. "Is she sick?"

"No," Agnes replied almost instantly. "She's..."

She paused for a moment.

"She looks exhausted. We should let her rest. It's Sunday, she can sleep more if she wants to."

She then asked Melissa and, to my surprise, Topa, to leave the room. After they left, she sat cross-legged by my side and softly grabbed me to put me on her lap.

"Come here."

I didn't bother resisting - not that I was even allowed to. After nesting to find a comfortable position, I continued trying to sleep as Agnes was gently petting me. After a few seconds, as if to make sure no one was eavesdropping, she said:

"I know you're not tired. So, why are you sad?"

My mood improved immediately when she asked that. Before she asked that everyone leave the room, I was angry at her for not noticing that I was depressed, as if her saying that I was just exhausted was a betrayal, but I was happily deceived that it was just a scheme to lure Topa and Melissa into leaving us alone so I would feel more free to lay out my feelings for Agnes.

As an answer, I pushed my head onto her belly, as if that made the snuggles any more comfortable, raising my eyes to hers only to immediately flee from them in guilt. A quick glance at my tails indicated that they were still immobile and visibly not willing to move at all.

"Oh," Agnes said, noticing my troubled glances at my hindquarters.

She was the one looking away in guilt.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'm not upset. Or... Maybe a bit. But it's not your fault. It's just that I've never seen you wag your tails since I took you home. I don't even know if you're happy. When we went back to the pokemon centre, it was the first time I had seen you joyful when

Nurse Joy came to see us. I'm wondering... If I made the right decision to take you with me."

I was confused. How did she jump to that conclusion from my tails not wagging? She was right in thinking I wasn't all that happy, but that was unrelated to her. She didn't know I used to be human. Even if I didn't, the wound alone would have been enough to completely shatter my spirits. Either way, she was indeed hurt and it was partly my fault.

Trying to find a way to cheer her up, I stood on my back legs and tried to lick her face. She gently shielded herself with her hand, saying in an amused tone:

"No, Ruby, you're not allowed to lick our faces."

Feigning surprise, I stared at her with wide eyes, then climbed off her lap, took a few steps away, and turned my back to her.

"Hey, don't pout."

She leaned forward and enclosed me in her arms, dragging me closer to her with her joined hands. I resisted for a few seconds then let her carry me back to her lap. When my rear hit her feet, I flipped over and landed on my back. Her smile soon turned to a very serious face upon seeing my scar.

"You know..." she started in a very serious voice. "Nevermind what I said. You were wild before I found you, right? If I didn't find you... You'd have died. Killed... And no one knows why or how. How do you live it? How does it feel to know that you escaped death by a thread?"

I shrugged, but that indifference was a lie. Even now, I wasn't too sure what to make of it. What did surviving actually mean? Was it a second chance given to me? Was it just "not my time"? And this transformation... why? And why a wounded vulpix? Did my transformation have anything to do with my death?

"I don't understand how you can be so neutral about that. Pokemon understand death, right? How can you feel nothing knowing that you've been so close to dying? When I..."

She didn't continue her sentence.

"Hey," she said, looking into the void. "Do you know why I decided to be part of the police?"

I obviously didn't. Realizing she expected an answer, I slowly moved my head to tell her.

"Lives matter," she said as if that explained anything. "My parents... they wanted me to take up their job and lead the company after their retirement. But... I'm not interested in that. All they want is to make money. I don't blame them, mind you, they just want Melissa and I to have the most comfortable life possible. I just think there's better to do."

She took a small break. I couldn't see well in her eyes because of my position, but I could hear from the shakiness of her voice that she was being extremely serious. I didn't like the situation much - it was too serious and too sad for me. However, I did not say anything and let her continue her story.

"I want to matter," she eventually continued. "I want to make a difference in someone's life. I want someone to look at me in the eyes and say 'thanks to you, I can wake up in the morning willing to carry on'. I want to go to bed every day knowing that I did something good for someone. When Topa..."

She interrupted her speech again. Chuckling silently, she smiled for herself.

"See, I found you when I was jogging late at night. It was a Saturday. You crawled out of the woods on the Glossy Hills. You were... Huh, I get shivers just thinking about it. I had to do something. You know, I think anyone else would have just let you die there thinking you were

doomed. But... I've seen enough to know that every life is worth trying. So I called the pokemon centre. They gave me instructions to keep you alive waiting for them. Then they transported you and put you in an operating room for hours. Do you remember all that?"

I nodded to say no.

"It was quite shocking, honestly. And gruesome. And yet... Here you are, alive and well. You just have a... permanent reminder of what you've been through. I saved you, didn't I? Even though the nurses and doctors did all the work... I have the feeling that I'm the one who enabled you to continue living. And that makes immensely happy."

Even though she said that, she didn't sound happy at all. I felt like she was about ready to cry.

"It's funny," she continued. "People don't understand death. They don't know what a life is worth. But people like us... well, and pokemon too... we know that. We've seen enough."

She put her hand through the top of her head, a bit above her eyebrows, massaging her hair.

"I have my own reminder of what a life is worth," she said, seemingly not talking to me anymore, stuck in absent monologue she had been needing for too long. "I promised myself to do whatever I could to help others. I'm not particularly bright, so being a doctor was out of the question for me. The police was the best choice I had. And I don't regret making it. My parents were disappointed to hear I wouldn't continue their work, but it's my choice, right? So I chose. And I chose right."

She turned her eyes to me then jolted, as if she were only now realizing I was in the same room.

"You know, I'm really happy that you survived. It gives me the feeling that I did something. I made a difference. For you. So please, look at me in the eyes and tell me you are willing to carry on."

Her eyes were blurred out by her coming tears. Before I could react, she grabbed me and hugged me tightly, holding my head against hers, her back sometimes agitated by a hidden spasm as her breathing seemed to become irregular. Unsure what to do, I just hugged her back, and after a few seconds, something wet fell onto my fur. It was the most genuine hug I could remember receiving, warm and comforting like nothing before. As we were tightly embracing each other, I found myself genuinely enjoying the moment, and realised with a smile that my tails were moving on their own.

"You seem better," Topa noticed the day after.

"I... guess."

"Are you ready to start learning Ember?"

I nodded. I still didn't know why I felt so depressed the day before, but the time I spent with Agnes seemed to have corrected that. I was glad Topa didn't ask about what happened, or insist on the events of the Sunday, for I was definitely not willing to talk about it and it would just have annoyed me.

"Alright," she said when we got to the practice room. "You have become fairly good at throwing fire, so this should not be too hard. The first thing you need to do is create and throw a fireball. Like this."

To show me what exactly I was to aim for, she threw a fireball at the wall. I couldn't help but feel envious of how strong and consistent her fire felt, while mine was still vacillating and probably very weak.

"To do that, you will need to be able to direct your fire inside your muzzle. Direct it towards the bottom of it first, then quickly switch to the top. The fire will roll inside and you will be able to throw a fireball."

Directing the fire inside my muzzle was quite easy, but every time I tried to change its location, I would immediately stop feeding it and the flames would dissipate inside of my mouth. After what felt like an exhausting hour of failed attempts, I whined to Topa that I couldn't do it.

"Try doing it with your muzzle open?" she asked.

I obeyed, giving the fire different directions to go at first to show that I could indeed direct it, but again, when I tried to change its direction while still creating fire, it resulted in a failure.

"You are not throwing enough of it," Topa said after carefully watching what I was doing. "That is odd. Why are you restraining from throwing large quantities of fire? Your flames are going to be less effective if you do that."

"Well it's... it's fire. It's dangerous. I mean..."

For some reason, I had trouble explaining this instinctive restraint. I was persuaded that the human part of me was to blame, but I couldn't find any reason why. It could just be that I lacked experience and didn't know the correct amount of fire to create, but if that was the case, there would probably be times when I would create too much of it. In fact, I was never creating too much and my flames were always too weak.

"I'll do my best."

Trying to focus more, I spent some time creating as much fire as I could before trying to move it. This time, I was faced with the opposite problem: I couldn't direct the fire I was creating. I threw a few flames before me to silently ask Topa about it.

"That is a correct amount," she said. "All you need to do is create as much fire as you can, and your flames will be stronger."

After a lot more trial and error, I finally managed to create a sufficient amount of flames and direct them inside my muzzle. Moving them from bottom to top proved to be harder, and I hadn't had a successful try by noon.

"Let us have a break," Topa said.

"Okay," I said, disappointed at myself for not succeeding.

Despite the events of the day before, Agnes' behaviour didn't seem to have changed much towards me now that I was feeling better. She seemed to be busy with her own preoccupations and didn't go out of her way to find me. She greeted me when we stumbled upon each other in a corridor, but apart from a few pets and a joyful hello, I didn't get anything out of her.

After taking a break while humans were eating, Topa and I went back to the practice room. I was still thinking about Agnes' disappointing behaviour when Topa poked me to get me back to reality.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said. "It's just that... When I was human I'd annoy the hell out of my pets all the time just to get them to cuddle with me for five seconds. I couldn't meet them in the house without petting them or picking them up. But... Agnes doesn't do that. It's like she doesn't even care."

"I would not say she does not care. Remember you are still recovering. She is probably just being careful."

I wasn't convinced, but I didn't insist and went back to practising creating a fireball. Unfortunately, I was met with the same failures as before the break and quickly gave up.

"Are you giving up again?"

"I don't know. I have no idea what I'm doing wrong. I can direct the flames in my mouth but I can't move them to make the fireball."

"That is most likely because you stop feeding it when trying to redirect the flames. You are saturating your muzzle before you even start making the fireball. Do not wait until you have created as much fire as you can before moving it."

"Okay."

I tried again, focusing this time on the amount of fire I was creating. Before my muzzle started overflowing with fire, I tried redirecting the flames inside of it from bottom to top. To my greatest pleasure, I felt them roll above my tongue, but I didn't react in time to throw them and they dissipated quickly. After a few more tries, I was capable of creating a ball of fire. Throwing it proved very easy, and before the day ended, I could throw big fireballs at the walls around me.

"Wonderful!" Topa congratulated me. "Now, you can try changing their size, but that is not necessary. Also, it is currently taking you a certain time to create the fireballs, so you will have to practice being faster with that. Nevertheless, you have done really well. You learn fast."

I felt like I didn't deserve the compliments, but I accepted them anyway. In spite of making visible progress, I felt undermined by my obvious lack of skill in using my powers. I felt like I was less good than I should be. As young as this body may be, Topa made it clear that vulpix can learn Ember very early in their life, but I was unable to use it. I felt like I was some kind of degenerate vulpix that wouldn't have lived very long had I not been a pet.

The day after, I woke up surprisingly early, and Topa was still asleep. I stealthily went to the practice room to be the best I could at making fireballs before the ninetales woke up, hoping to surprise her with my skill when we resumed practice, but I didn't feel like I made any progress when Rakuen opened the door.

"Oh, hey Ruby," she said, surprised to find me there. "What are you doing here all alone? You're not allowed to exercise, you know? Were you playing on your own?"

My ears flattened on my head, pointing backwards, and I crouched slightly in a display of guilt. Rakuen noticed and pointed her finger at me.

"You shouldn't!" she said, lecturing me. "Come on now, you should eat something. I forbid you from coming here without someone else to watch you, okay?"

I respectfully nodded. She came to me and stretched her arms, asking for permission to lift me. Reluctantly, I let her do so and she carried me to the kitchen, where I found Topa already eating. She lifted an eye when we entered and tried to hide an amused smile for which I gave her murderous eyes.

After eating, we went to the practice room. Rakuen stared at me when I tried to leave the kitchen and I had to wait for Topa to leave first to make it obvious I was following her. This amused the ninetales very much, and once we were in the room, I roared:

"What?"

"Nothing," she said, still amused. "It seems you trust Rakuen more now."

"I don't," I pouted. "Agnes just ordered me to let her touch me."

"I did not know that," Topa lied to finish the conversation. "What were you doing here so early?"

"Trying to practice fireballs. I'm... I'm so bad at them."

"Considering you only learn how to make one yesterday, I would say you are surprisingly good."

I looked away, not willing to continue the conversation. I knew what was going to be said anyway and it was a waste of time.

"Alright," Topa said after a short silence. "Do you remember what I explained about unpowers?"

"Vaguely."

"Do you remember the way they work and how they affect pokemon?"

"Huh... They're not real. Like not real fire, right? And they just... hurt."

"Yes, that is correct. Of course, you can do basically anything with unfire that you could do with real fire. However, we tend to use the same kinds of attacks all the time. Humans have noticed those patterns and given name to those moves, as they call them. For example, Ember is just a fireball. It is generally fairly weak. You can do more, like Flamethrower, Fire Spin... Each move has its uses, of course. This naming system is very convenient."

"I... guess. Then..."

I wanted to ask about less direct moves, like Will-O-Wisp, but I wasn't sure what her reaction would be if she learnt about the pokemon games in my world. I decided to stay silent and find a way to ask stealthily later.

"Are there only direct moves? Like... You talked about... Flamethrower and Fire Spin. Do they just... directly hurt? Are there are other kinds of moves?"

"Oh, yes. Not all are meant to inflict damage directly. Some will be aimed at giving your opponent a disadvantage. For example, Confuse Ray will confuse them. I talked about Confuse Ray before, do you remember?"

"Yes, you used it to catch that burglar."

"There are two versions of it, again. It is a move affiliated to the Ghost type. Its direct effect - or real version if you prefer - is to make its target's senses confused. It is very useful to throw someone off-balance or render them unable to fight. People or pokemon affected by it will likely be unable to walk or move correctly, and they might hit themselves. The unpower version is less direct, but has similar effects. It will screw with your energy balance and, if you do not resist it well, it will stop you from using your moves and damage you when you try. For example, imagine a fireball exploding inside your muzzle when you try to cast it."

"That sounds strong."

"It is not as strong as it sounds. You can resist it and it only lasts so long - but it is useful to give you a temporary edge to try and land a more powerful move, or as a defensive manoeuvre. The difficulty with it is your target must be looking at you in the eyes when you cast it."

"So... wait. You said it's a Ghost-type. But we are Fire-type right?"

"Oh, you can use moves of types other than the one you are affiliated to! The vulpix evolution line for example is notorious for being able to use a lot of Ghost and Dark-type moves. That is the origin behind the cursed tails, remember?"

"That humans get cursed for a thousand years if they touch a ninetales' tails without its permission?"

"Yes! That is obviously not true, but some moves we can learn are nothing short of curses. You will be able to learn those moves eventually. I can at least teach you the ones I know."

"How does a pokemon learn moves?"

"You either self-teach or get taught. For example, you would be able to self-teach Flamethrower fairly easily once you can throw an Ember. On the other hand, it would be impossible for you to learn more specific moves like Confuse Ray without being taught. Parents generally teach their kids their moves, but it is possible to learn from a different pokemon. Some vulpix have psychic powers, but they need to be taught by a pokemon that can use some on their own. I do not know if you do have some - that is likely something Agnes wants to check."

"Psychic powers, huh..."

All that did match what I knew of pokemon... But I needed more explanations to see how much I could safely assume I knew.

"So how many kinds of moves are there?"

"Kinds?"

"Yes. Like... damaging moves, curses... What else is there?"

"Oh. Well, there are some moves that inflict damage over time. They are a form of indirect offence. For example, Fire Spin will surround your opponent with flames that will damage them over time if they do not find a way to get rid of them. It does not deal much damage, but it can distract them. In a similar way, Will-O-Wisp will also damage them over time. This one is different though. Unlike Fire Spin, Will-O-Wisp does not stay around the target. It will affect them directly - the term for it is burn. What it does is..."

She seemed to be thinking.

"I am not sure how to explain it. Let us say... Part of your energy will be transferred to your target and damage it. Unlike Fire Spin, there is no way to get rid of a burn."

"What is this about energies?" I asked, actually confused. "You're talking about them but I don't know what they are."

"They are the source of your powers. Your unpowers, more precisely. When you fight another pokemon, you will both chip away each other's energy. The one who has their energy depleted first will lose. This is a painful process as you may expect, and being depleted of energy sometimes results in loss of consciousness."

"That's dangerous!"

"Absolutely not! Energy replenishes fairly quickly, unless it is being used. You see, when you are resting or not in a fighting situation, you passively generate some of this energy until you can hold no more. However, when fighting, your body will be focused on taking the hits and using said energy to hit in return, and you will not refill it."

"So... Is there a limit to how many times I can use a move? What decides how much of this energy I lose when I get hit by one?"

"Theoretically, there is one, but in a real fight, you will be able to use moves as much as you want. You see, you mentioned it before, but there is a type advantage matchup. It is basically a chart of how effective an energy is at dissipating another. The more effective, the more damage you will take and the more it will hurt. Of course, the raw power of the move you are hit affects that, too."

"That's complicated," I complained.

"Not all that much! You will remember that quite fast, do not worry. To come back to your earlier question, there are also defensive moves that will enhance your ability to take hits if not completely negate them."

"Pokemon battles sound like a hassle," I said, disappointed. "I expected them to be more exciting. Now it just sounds like a strategy game."

Topa seemed surprised, but did not mention it.

"Pokemon battles involve a lot of strategy! That is the role of the trainer. I am no expert on that because I have not battled much myself, but a lot of preparation goes into it. The trainer will define a strategy based on what pokemon you are fighting, and it will be your role to apply this strategy while fighting. Of course, your opponent will have their own strategy. The trainer has to figure out that strategy and a way to counter it. It is very different from actual fighting, which is a lot more guts and less brains."

"Huh... I don't want to get in a real fight. The way you're talking about it though... Pokemon battles sound so exciting."

"They are! I would love to battle more, but being an evolved pokemon, Melissa's school refuses to let her pick me for her battle lessons because I have an unfair advantage. She might ask to pick you in the future though."

"So... How exactly am I supposed to apply the strategy? Can I not react to what my opponent is doing? How do I do that?"

"It takes time to learn. How about a practical lesson?"

Having said that, she bent forward, her tails wagging in joy behind her. I could see she was excited to play with me, and I couldn't hide the fact that I myself was excited at the idea of battling.

Chapter 14

My ears lowered themselves at the same time as my head. "I can't. I'm not supposed to exercise. No wrestling and no battling until I'm fully healed."

Topa froze in her position for a few seconds, then sat down.

"Oh. That is a bit disappointing. Are you still allowed to practice moves?"

"Yeah, I suppose. I mean, we're not going to move much, are we?"

"No. You can practice laying down if you want."

"Meh."

I wanted to move. I wanted to exercise, to use this body of mine that I had not yet been able to fully test, but I was stuck for another two weeks, until the final health check and hopefully the permission to start moving more.

"Now that you can make a fireball," Topa said, switching the topic abruptly, "the only thing left you need to learn is how to produce the unfire energy. This should be the easiest step."

"I'm not sure about that. It's easy for you. But for me, it's completely new."

"Breathing fire was new to you, but you learnt how to do it remarkably fast."

I turned my head away to hide an embarrassed smile. I wasn't happy about Topa's compliments - I felt like I didn't deserve them. If anything, I should have been able to breathe fire even faster, since my body apparently already knew how to do it, and logically, I expected it to be the same for Ember. According to Topa, the vulpix I

took the body of was old enough to know the move, so I should be able to learn it rapidly.

"Alright," she said, noticing I was getting gloomy. "Do you remember what the unfire energy feels like?"

"No."

I had no clue. How would I even be able to... sense it?

"Say, Topa," I asked, interrupting her as she was getting up. "Can humans... detect... er... sense those energies?"

"The ones we use for the unpowers? No, they cannot."

"Then how would I be able to sense it?"

"You are not human, Ruby."

She stared at me with an obvious look of disapproval on her face, visibly tired of my ramblings about how I was not a vulpix. I knew she was right, but I didn't want to admit it. I still had some hope.

"Let me show you."

Having said that, she fired an Ember at the wall. Just like the first time she showed me one of her moves, a weird kind of excitement filled me. My heart was beating a bit faster, and I was full of energy that I was eager to spend. I wanted to move, jump, run, or do whatever I could, as long I was no longer sitting on my tails waiting for something to happen. The extreme excitement I had become subject to was a strangely comfortable feeling, especially given how my life had been going for the past two weeks. For a short moment, it made me forget my problems about being a vulpix and my current situation got lost in oblivion. I just wanted to battle.

"Did you feel it?"

"All I feel is... excited. Just like last time."

"Focus. This excitement is normal, but do not let it steal your concentration. Here."

She fired another Ember that flew past my head and crashed against a different wall. The sight of a massive fireball aimed right at my eye scared me and I ducked with a delay too long to have dodged it had it been aimed at me. However, when the fireball was by my eye, I could feel no heat or no air movement from it - only a weird sensation that quickly overcame my entire body. I was unable to describe it, but I felt my inner flame more excited than ever.

"I felt something," I said. "It's... it's weird."

"Notice how your inner flame has changed."

I focused on it, only to notice that the changes I felt earlier were increasing in intensity. The inner flame didn't feel like a flame anymore. It was still radiating the same comforting warmth, but it wasn't the same warmth as one could feel from a campfire. It was... different.

Unfortunately, after a few seconds of calm, the flame came back to its previous state, and the new sensation I could feel completely vanished. I was disappointed to notice that the surge of energy I had just gained disappeared.

"Aw," I sighed, unable to hide my discontent.

"You have to be able to make your own inner flame switch from this state to the other one," Topa explained. "Remember how you felt when I fired my Ember, and remember that you have control over the flame. You can do it."

"Okay."

As expected, my first few attempts at it completely failed. I had no idea how to control my powers, and even less how to control my

inner flame which I couldn't even see or locate. It was like trying to lift an object with my mind.

"Oh!" I shouted, surprising both Topa and myself.

"What is it?"

"Do I have psychic powers? Can I lift stuff without touching it?"

"We have already discussed that. I do not know if you do, and to find out, we need the assistance of a pokemon who does have psychic powers. Please focus on Ember for now."

"It's just... I was thinking," I said, trying to justify myself. "I can't control my inner flame. I don't even know where it is. It's like trying to move an object I can't see."

"You can control the inner flame. That is what you do when you breathe real fire. The only difference between real fire and unfire is the state of your inner flame."

"How do I switch it to battle mode?"

"Battle mode?"

"Yeah, how I felt earlier. You know... For pokemon battles."

"Battle mode," Topa repeated with a chuckle. "I like that name."

"What's so funny?" I pouted, unhappy with her amused reaction, thinking she was making fun of me.

"Sorry. Focus on what you felt when the Ember flew past your head. Do you remember how you threw your first flame? You just imagined yourself breathing fire, and shortly after you were already doing it. It is the same here. Remember how you felt, force yourself to feel the same way, and your inner flame will adapt."

I sighed. Although she was right, I had no idea, even now, how I even breathed fire. I just... did it. I couldn't explain how. Yet... this felt strangely comforting to me. I was already using my fire breathing powers without having to focus on them. I was clearly getting better at it, I would keep becoming better at it, and it would be easier for me to pass as a real vulpix.

However... did that mean that I was actually turning more into a vulpix than I thought? Was I losing part of myself by learning how to use these powers? What would eventually remain of my human self?

"Ruby?" Topa said, poking me with her muzzle.

"Nothing," I said, turning my head away. "I don't want to bother you with... that stuff. I'll try again. Sorry."

I focused on my inner flame again, feeling it crackling inside of my body. I couldn't locate it precisely, but I knew it was there and I could feel its effects. It felt... stronger than before. When I first felt its presence, it was weak and full of hesitation, but it now felt a lot more vigorous and determined. Was it a sign that my condition was improving, or was it caused by the excitement from Topa's Ember?

I could remember very well how Topa's Ember felt. I remembered how the area around my heart radiated a strong comfortable warmth and how my entire body was getting excited, making me want to jump or run. If I learnt how to do the same, I would eventually learn to battle.

I remembered what I saw in the anime. I was already picturing myself battling other pokemon, jumping unrealistic heights into the air to dodge my opponent's moves before landing on the ground and throwing fire of my own. I could picture myself in an arena big like a football stadium, being cheered for by hundreds of spectators as I was swarming my opponent with dozens of small fireballs. I could picture myself rushing at them while they were still dazed by the sea of fire I unleashed upon them, then jump onto them and fire one last ball directly into their chest, causing an explosion of vapour and

smoke, and when the smoke was finally clearing itself, my opponent laid on the ground unconscious and I was standing victoriously on them. The announcer called my name and Agnes rushed to me, picking me up to congratulate me for my victory. She was smiling widely, satisfied with my performance, happy to be the winner of the match. And I was happy too, not only because I won, but also because by winning I made Agnes happy.

Coming brutally back to earth, I caught myself smiling like an idiot. The joy on Agnes' face and the euphoria of the victory all felt too good. I was looking forward to feeling those for real, after a hard battle, hopefully against an opponent better than me. I was excited. I wanted to fight.

"Try now," Topa said, concealing a smile under her noble face.

I focused on my inner flame. It was radiating a completely new kind of energy, one unlike any I felt before. I gave myself a few seconds to properly form a cold fireball in my muzzle, and when I threw it, I was surprised to notice coming from it the same energy I felt flying past my ear.

"See?" Topa said, unable to hide her smile anymore. "You did it! You threw your first Ember!"

I should have felt proud, as proud as I was when I threw my first flame, but my body was longing for more and the only feeling I had was an overwhelming excitement.

"Try again," Topa said. "Make it bigger."

I obliged. My second Ember, while bigger than the first one, didn't last very long and vanished into thin air before hitting the wall I was aiming at.

"Why?" I asked.

"You can summon the correct energy," Topa said, "but you need to make it more consistent and more dense. You will learn that by practising, but you have already done the hardest part. You will be able to throw decent Embers by the end of the week, if not before. Congratulations!"

As my excitement faded away, my earlier thoughts about the loss of my humanity came back to me and I started feeling depressed. Was this one more step towards being a normal vulpix?

I didn't share my thoughts with Topa and asked to stop practising for a while. Despite the surges of energy I felt earlier, or maybe because of them, I was exhausted and I only wanted to go sleep. Topa agreed to it, but asked me to stay awake at least until dinner.

I met with Agnes randomly in the corridors as we were going to eat. As she greeted me with a joyful "Hey Ruby!" that I failed to return, our serious conversation from the day before came back to me. Memories of her hidden tears were rushing back to me as I stared at her usual happy smile, going back through what she had said.

She was entirely right. She had made a difference. For me at least: she had saved my life. Or... was it mine she saved? What would have happened if the vulpix I was now had not met Agnes? Would I have turned into her at all? Did that mean that Agnes was indirectly responsible for my transformation? What did she mean with "we have seen enough of death"? I remembered she stroked the top of her head while saying that. Had she faced death in the past too? If so, when, and how?

I couldn't stop peeking at Topa from the corner of my eyes while we were eating. She knew. All I had to do was ask and she would tell me what happened to Agnes. Yet... I had the feeling there was something more. Agnes had mentioned Topa during her rambling about death. There was something the ninetales was hiding from me. Would it be sensible to directly ask? If even Agnes could not continue, would Topa, who seemed to be directly involved, agree to

tell me? And what was it about the Glossy Hills? What were those hills?

Topa looked at me and smiled when she was done eating. Realizing I had been staring at her and had not eaten anything, I hurried up to finish the contents of my own dish, almost embarrassed to have been caught staring. Something had happened to Agnes and Topa, maybe the both of them together, and I had no idea what. It made me realise that, even if my situation was arguably bad, I wasn't the only one with problems and with a busy past, and I felt ashamed of being so selfish by throwing my own issues onto everyone as if they would be able to help me solve them, when they had issues of their own to fight.

Topa was right: by the end of the week, I was able to switch my inner fire to battle mode in the blink of an eye and to throw respectable Ember. She seemed to be very happy with my improvement, but at the same time, her pressing and excited tone whenever she mentioned wrestling or battling indicated she was looking forward to those, and my crippling wound was a hindrance for her. In spite of her own excitement, she remained very careful and watched over me to make sure I wouldn't disobey Nurse Joy's orders. Agnes too was being very careful, but something had changed in her behaviour towards me. She had become less indifferent, and although she didn't spend her time with me since I was always in the pokemon fighting room, she did seek me out often in the evening, when she was watching TV or playing console games before going to bed, and I would happily hop on the sofa with her to cuddle for a while before we both went to sleep. The fact I spent my days in a closed room seemed to worry her a bit, but she knew Topa was with me and making sure I was not overdoing my exercising. Although I was a bit jealous of Agnes' trust in Topa, I tried my best to convince myself that she was just making sure my recovery was going well.

The rest of the family didn't seem to have noticed anything. Melissa, while clearly interested in me, kept a respectful distance, probably on Agnes' request. She greeted me when she met me and didn't try to

pet me, but I had the feeling she was making great efforts to achieve that. Her parents, however, were still as distant as ever. They didn't seem to care about me at all and only agreed to let Agnes adopt me because they didn't want to be bothered with her pestering them about it, and because she was an adult who could make her own decisions. In a way, I was thankful for their attitude, because it meant I didn't have to deal with them, and unlike Agnes and Melissa I had no idea if they were good people or not. The father seemed to be very kind, but his wife made me uncomfortable just thinking about her. That one time we met when I was brought back from the pokemon centre, there was something in her eyes that scared me.

In the evening on Sunday, after a rough day of practice, Topa and I were laying on our respective pillow, enjoying a well-deserved rest. Agnes' words had been echoing in my head through the whole week. Not a day went by that I didn't think back about it, especially the cryptic way she talked about some past event where she or Topa had faced death. It was very clearly of utmost importance to her and marked her enough to change her views on life, but no amount of thinking could even get me close to guessing what had happened. Looking at Topa had become weird: I couldn't see her for who she was anymore, and I kept trying to read through her as if there were something in her body that could give me a clue. I felt like she was wearing a massive sign that said "death has visited me" and it was all I could see.

"You changed," Topa said abruptly.

"Pardon?"

"You changed," she repeated. "Compared to last week. You do not feel happier, it is something different. As if you had... matured. You used to be constantly thinking about how you are not a vulpix and do not want to be one, complaining quite often about your current situation and overall feeling extremely depressed, but... Over the past week, you have been practising Ember diligently without a word. You seem to have more energy, or to be more motivated. You act more natural with the humans than you used to. You spend your

evenings cuddling with Agnes. I do not know what she told you last Sunday, but it makes me happy to see you being so much better."

"Well..."

I wasn't sure whether or not to raise the subject. This was a golden opportunity. Topa had basically brought it up herself. I just needed to mention what Agnes said and surreptitiously inquire about the events she was referring to.

"I've been thinking," I said. "I... I feel ashamed. I've been so selfish and so childish. I've been acting like this... transformation of mine was all that mattered and I've been annoying you with it all the time. I realised that... I'm not the only one with things on her mind. When I was a kid and I got whiny about my problems or complained about people not giving me attention, my father used to say 'everyone is fighting a battle you know nothing of' and I've been completely ignoring that. I don't know if it's because I've been overwhelmed by what happened. I don't know if it's because this body is still very young and it is affecting me. All I know is I feel bad about being so selfish and not thinking about you all this time. I'm sorry."

"Well, er... That is a surprise. You have nothing to apologise for. I cannot understand your situation, but I can understand that it would be too much to deal with. Now that things are set, you seem to be doing better. I assume you had time to sort out your feelings."

"Honestly... No. I still don't know where I stand with the... the transformation. Am I a vulpix? Am I a human? Will I become a vulpix or will I remain human? And... I still feel embarrassed acting like a normal pet."

"Those will go away in time, I am sure of it. How long has it been?"

"Twenty-two days."

"Oh. I was not aware you kept a precise count."

"Well..."

I turned my head away, embarrassed.

"I promised myself I would. I... it's so stupid. I feel like... it's going to help me. I don't want to turn into a vulpix. I want to remain human, at least as much as I can, and I feel like keeping count of days will help."

"I do not know what will happen," Topa admitted. "This is the first time I or any pokemon before have faced this kind of situation."

"I promised myself that I would stop bitching and start working on getting better. The first step for that is to stop complaining and to start doing shit."

"Is that the reason why you have been so silent? You were reluctant to bestow your problems upon me?"

"Well... Yes."

"I appreciate your concern," she said. "However... I think there is a right middle to find between talking too much and not talking at all. I would rather you share your thoughts with me if you think I can help you. Your silence had me pretty worried, but I did not dare inquire about it because you seemed to be getting better and I thought it was part of the process."

"Sorry. I'm fine now, so if there's anything you want to know, just ask. I'll do my best to answer."

"I am curious... What did Agnes tell you?"

A shiver travelled down my spine to the tip of my tails. How much could I tell without feeling like I was spilling the beans?

"She... She got very serious and personal. She started talking about herself. And me. And..."

The back of my throat clenched to the point where I couldn't get the words out. My vision became blurry and my voice started hesitating.

"She said that every life matters. That had she not happened upon... upon me when I was dying, I wouldn't have survived. That anyone else would have taken me for dead and left me to agonise. But she didn't. She stayed with me, called the pokemon centre, and eventually... I survived. She said it made her happy. Really, really happy. And it really does. But... She was so sad. She said..."

My speech was interrupted by a sob. Topa stood up and laid down around me, covering me with her long tails. I knew I should probably stop speaking, but I couldn't. I felt like I wasn't in control of myself anymore.

"She said she wanted to matter. To make a difference in someone's life. She wants people to continue fighting thanks to her. It's so important to her, I could feel it. And that day... She made a difference in my life. Thanks to her, I can continue living and fighting. And she said... she's happy that I survived. Because she made a difference. And she asked me if I was thankful for that."

"Well... are you?"

I couldn't answer and simply broke into tears.

Topa didn't insist after that and we slept together, cuddling closely. The day after, I felt full of energy again, and the breakdown the night before didn't seem to have affected me. My questions about Agnes' past were however still unanswered, and I raised the subject again while in bed.

"Topa, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure!"

"About what Agnes said... She said that... That 'people and pokemon like you and me have seen enough to know what a life is

worth' and..."

Topa couldn't hide a violent shiver.

"Topa, what happened?"

Topa's eyes rapidly flicked to random places as she debated with herself. She was clearly willing to tell me, but she was still considering whether or not to. After what felt like hours, she took a deep breath.

"Agnes has..." she started.

She hesitated again. What was so special about this event? Why was Topa so reluctant to talk about it?

"Let us say her encounter with you was not the first time she faced death."

"Why? Did someone she knew die? What happened?"

Topa sighed. It was obviously too late now and she couldn't back away. She had to tell me.

"When she was young... Huh, I was just a few months old at the time. Agnes was... I do not remember. Eleven? Twelve? Melissa was not very old either. Still being taken care of full time by her mother. She could not even speak yet. I was a nameless vulpix, but Agnes already loved me. She cared for me, but I was to become Melissa's pet, not hers. She did not have a pokemon. My mother was still alive at the time too. Agnes would spend her free time with us. Sir was too busy with the company to do anything, and Madam was taking care of Melissa. We were just... All three of us, a small group of outcasts, living together as we could. One day..."

She hesitated again. I could clearly remember Agnes mentioned Topa in her speech. Did something happen to her while she was still a young vulpix? Was that why Agnes had been so shocked when

she saw me and why she insisted on taking me home? Was my encounter with her, on the contrary, what caused her to want to become a police officer? No, that couldn't be. She had only met me three weeks ago and she was clearly already a police student.

"What happened?" I insisted. "She mentioned you. Did something happen to you?"

Topa's heart skipped a beat. Her eyes widened so much that I could see her entire pupils.

"She mentioned me? What did she say?"

"Nothing. She just said... 'When Topa' and then stopped talking. Come on, tell me. You're scaring me. Did something happen to you?"

Topa sighed, but it was a sigh of relief.

"No, no, nothing happened to me."

"Then what? Tell me!"

"Okay, okay."

She took a deep breath.

"At the time... It was a Wednesday. That is when pokemon battling classes are in Agnes' school, and now Melissa's. She had taken me to school to practice with me. I was still a vulpix, so there was no unfairness about me being evolved. Poor Melissa, she has to use the pokemon the school lends pupils because they do not want her to battle with me. Being evolved is not always an advantage. Maybe she will ask to use you?"

I almost yelled at Topa. I couldn't take this habit of hers to constantly change the subject.

"What happened?" I roared.

"We were going back home. Sir and Madam were too busy to pick her up by car, so she decided to take public transports. Only..."

Topa hesitated again. It took her time to gather the resolve to continue, but she eventually said:

"She got hit by a bus when she crossed the road. The very bus that was supposed to take her home nearly killed her."

Chapter 15

There was a moment of silence, during which the ninetales looked away from me, breathing heavily. It was very clear to me that it was painful for Topa to tell this story, but I was puzzled. Agnes had obviously survived the accident, and with no important consequences from what I could see, but the way Topa talked felt like she didn't. Had this accident really been that traumatic for her?

"What happened after that?"

"The bus driver immediately called an ambulance and Agnes was taken to a hospital. I was not allowed in, of course, and I just watched as the truck took her away. The police came soon after to investigate. One of them was kind enough to drive me to the hospital Agnes had been taken to."

I couldn't even begin to imagine Topa's pain as she watched the ambulance take Agnes away, unsure whether or not she was alive, and not even being allowed to accompany her to the hospital. I had never in my life witnessed an accident, and none of my family members had ever been injured like that, so I had no way to understand how she felt or to empathise. I was lost, and started regretting my decision to push Topa to tell me that story.

"I waited by the door of the room she was in," Topa continued. "The policeman who took me to the hospital called Agnes' parents to tell them what happened. But... They never came. Madam was busy with Melissa at home, and Sir was at his company and not answering the phone. The policeman tried to get them to come, but they did not."

Topa sighed.

"He stayed with me to try to calm me down. I did not wait long, and one of the doctors came out to say that Agnes' life was not in

danger. She had a bad concussion and several broken ribs, but she would survive."

"What was the result of the investigation?" I asked, hoping to change the subject a bit.

"It was an accident, of course. There were witnesses. Even I knew it was an accident. Yet... I hated the driver so much. Had I seen him again, I probably would have attacked him."

"But... wouldn't you have been killed if you did?"

"Yes. At the time, I really did not even think about it. I wanted to take revenge on that person for possibly ruining Agnes' life. Only... it took me a long time to realize that they were not directly responsible. I had trouble understanding the concept of accidents back then. Explaining that to me and allowing me to cope with Agnes' accident was the last thing my mother did before she passed away."

I didn't dare ask what happened to her mother, considering the circumstances and her state, but I was curious. Topa did say that ninetales could live outrageously long lives. Was her mother that old? Did she die from something else?

"Agnes was remarkable when she woke up," Topa continued. "I was allowed to see her quickly after. She was sitting on the bed, a big bandage on her head, and she was smiling. She was fully aware of what happened, but she was not shocked. Doctors thought she had brain damage because she would just sit on the bed smiling to everyone and being happy. She saw a psychologist, and when asked why she was smiling, she just replied that accidents happen and are nothing to be upset about. She even asked how the bus driver was handling it and if anyone else had been injured. However... when she asked where her parents were and her doctor said they would not come, she completely changed. She immediately stopped smiling. She turned around in her bed and went to sleep."

I could imagine. If my parents refused to see me after I got hit by a car, I would be quite depressed too.

"The day after, she refused to take her medication. Let me die, she said. And she would repeat that to every nurse or doctor that came to see her. Let me die. She would not talk to anyone. I was lost and scared, I did not know what to do and I thought she might actually let herself die. I knew she was in a lot of pain, but she did not take her painkillers. She really did not want to live anymore."

I wanted to comment on it, but refrained. I thought it would be best to let Topa finish the story and change the subject.

"The policeman who brought me in asked if he could talk to her. Nurses were out of ideas and let him. He let me out of the room, closed the door behind him, and talked to her for hours. After he left, Agnes was not smiling, but she did accept her medication and care. I have no idea what he told her, but he certainly saved her life. Maybe that is why Agnes wanted to join the police."

She stopped and looked at me. It took me a moment to realise that she expected me to say something.

"She didn't mention anything like that," I said. "Just that every life matters. I suppose that's what the policeman talked about."

"Oh," Topa said in a disappointed sigh.

"What happened then?"

"She recovered well and was driven back home. Her parents welcomed her as if she were just coming back from school and nothing happened. For a while, I was worried she would be jealous of Melissa, but she was not. She lived on without problems and continued going to school. The difference is her parents hired a driver to get her to school and back home."

"How thoughtful," I grinned.

"Yes," she said, understanding the sarcasm. "I was angry at them for making her depressed, but even to this day, I do not understand how she went from that deep a depression to acting normally in such a short time."

I shrugged. This was beyond me as well. I had the disturbing feeling that I did not actually want to know more. That was enough.

"I have a question," Topa said abruptly.

Her gloom had completely disappeared. I could almost see her joy radiating from her body, forming a shining halo of well-being, as opposed to the grim darkness that seemed to surround her just a few minutes earlier.

"Yes?"

"It might be a bit inappropriate, so if it is, please excuse me."

"Go ahead. I'll try my best to answer."

"You have died," she announced without sugarcoating. "How did that affect you? Agnes was fairly close to death and it seems to have changed her completely. What about you? You have been through and came back. What did it do?"

"Absolutely nothing," I replied.

She paused for a moment, her eyes wide open. "Mind explaining?"

I shrugged. "Did I really die? All I know is I was dead when I woke up. Is it accurate to say that I died? It would be accurate to say that I was dead, but... I didn't die. As in, I didn't experience my death. I was just dead. That sounds weird, am I making any sense?"

"Yes," Topa said. "You are saying that what could have changed Agnes was the accident. In your case, however, you did not experience any accident, or attack, or whatever it was that caused your wound."

"Yeah. I just... lived. Of course, I turned into a vulpix, so... If anything, that is what bothers me. Why? What do I make of it?"

"You have told me the questions that bother you," Topa replied. "I am unable to answer them, or even help you with that. It is best not to ask them at all."

I took a short break to collect my thoughts.

"I don't understand."

"Pardon?"

"I know where your question comes from. People who get in accidents and nearly die... they all completely change after that experience, right? That is why you asked me that question. But me... it didn't really change anything. I think that... no one actually changes after that. They just want the experience to mean something. I mean, coming close to dying, that has to be something, right? Except it's nothing, but people want to make something out of it. They change their life, they convince themselves that they changed for the better. It's like a reset button. They can instantly make changes that would take too much effort to make gradually and they even have an excuse for it. Fact is, they know that it's a virtually worthless experience, but they don't want to admit it. That would be the same as admitting their life is worthless. Actually, the very fact that they lived makes the experience worthless. It's nothing different from breaking a leg. No one ever changes because they break a limb. Why would they change because they come close to dying but survive? Almost dying is not permanent. It's a temporary event. People don't change because of one-time problems. People never change."

"That is quite dark, what you are saying. But... I think I understand what you mean. Just because they actually survive means that the experience leaves no permanent traces, is that what you mean?"

"I suppose, yeah? Things like losing a limb would affect people greatly, but... that's because it's not fixed. I can't be resolved. Almost dying? It's resolved the very moment you wake up. Even if you remember it, it cannot affect you all that much. Because you lived."

"Is that why your own death experience seems to mean so little to you?"

"I don't know what I should make of it. I don't know if I actually died. I'm just way too confused for it to affect me at all."

Topa looked away as if she regretted asking the question.

We both agreed to take a good day's rest. Although I had many more questions, I thought it would be best not to ask them, at least not yet. Agnes was on vacation, but I spent most of my day alone, resting on my pillow, occasionally visited by Topa to check on me. I tried to think about my own death and the transformation, but I still had no idea what exactly happened, and I had too many questions about the events to really be able to come to any conclusions. At the end of the day, Topa's question had actually confused me even further.

The rest of the week was uneventful and spent practising Ember. On Friday morning, Agnes softly woke me up early. We had an appointment at the pokemon centre for a final health check. As before, I was washed, but without the plastic wrap around my belly. I was more prepared, this time, and it appeared to be much easier for them and enjoyable for me. Agnes congratulated me on keeping still, and showed me my reflection on the mirror again.

Although that was what I meant to do, it would have been hard for me not to focus on the gigantic scar across my belly. I went from the bottom of my right lung to the top of my left hip and was at least half a centimetre wide across its entire length. The flesh inside of it was still pink, and I could see at different points the fibres linking the two halves together. The pale beige fur of my belly was tainted with a red and orange tint around the scar - red from the blood, and orange from the antiseptic that was used to help the healing process. It was

a massive crevasse, remnant of a gaping wound. I could easily imagine how such wound would let my bowels out of my body and how much of a miracle it was that I survived.

Topa seemed to have seen the scar as well and was staring at me, her muzzle slightly ajar. I could only share her shocked expression. As I became acutely aware of her stare, I grew a disturbing tingling around the scar that was so uncomfortable I started moving to try to make it disappear. Agnes put me back on the floor, thinking I was struggling for that, but the strange feeling didn't disappear. It felt as if my bowels were fighting to go back outside.

"Are you alright?" Topa asked.

"Yea. I'm just being... conscious of the scar. It's very disturbing."

"We can talk about it later," she said. "You are expected in the pokemon centre. With good news, I hope!"

I didn't quite understand what she was talking about, apart from hearing that I was finally recovered, but that didn't bother me much. Agnes put me in the cage in the bed again and drove to the pokemon centre.

"Hey," nurse Joy said when she came to meet us, petting me on the head.

My tails were wagging again, but Agnes didn't seem to be upset this time. She greeted the nurse joyfully, and without waiting more, I was sent to different rooms for the medical exams, then back to waiting with Agnes. I forced my tails to wag while on her lap being petted, but I was certain that she knew I was forcing myself.

Nurse Joy came back with the results rapidly. She was smiling.

"I have good news," she said. "Ruby is pretty much completely healed. The wound has closed correctly, there is no sign of internal infection, and her bowels will suffer no long-term consequences."

She'll have a nasty scar, though, and fur won't grow over it, but her fur is long enough to cover the entire length of naked skin so it shouldn't be too visible. She might be very sensitive in that area, particularly to temperature changes, so be careful with it. Other than that, she's recovered remarkably well."

"That's awesome!" Agnes said, genuinely enthusiastic.

"Yes, indeed. She can start exercising again now. The second half of the year starts soon, right?"

"July. We still have two and a half weeks."

"Good. You'll need to watch over her and gradually get her back to activity. Start with just walking with her, longer every day. I recommend not to let her do any form of battling or wrestling for at least a week and to stick to walks, maybe short runs if she wants to. After that, she can start playing with Topa, but again, be very careful with her belly. Contact with water shouldn't be a problem anymore, too."

"So she'll be able to participate to classes with me?"

"Absolutely! I'll write a letter for the commissioner to let him know and give some instructions."

What did the commissioner have to do with this? Was he associated with the police school?

"Thank you very much," Agnes said, putting me on the floor.

Back to the manor, Agnes repeated the doctor's instructions to Topa, who listened very carefully, then went on to tell her parents the good news. Still sitting in the main hall, the ninetales turned to me, radiating with joy.

"Is that not fantastic? You can start exercising!"

"Heh," I said, completely void of enthusiasm. "It's good. I can start running, jumping, and whatnot. I'm not stuck anymore."

"You do not look so enthusiastic. Is something the matter?"

"I feel like... my vacation is over. I'm going to police school soon, and now I'm going to have to exercise every day, probably hard, to at least be in an acceptable physical shape before classes. I feel like there won't be any leisure time. I won't be able to keep practising Ember. We might not be able to do any fighting."

"Sure we will! If anything, wrestling and eventually battling should be part of the exercising. I have to teach you as much as I can about those two anyway, and that is a perfect opportunity to do so."

"That's going to have to wait anyway. I have to just walk for now."

"That would be best, yes. Start getting used to exercising lightly first. Otherwise, you might hurt yourself."

I knew she was right, but I really wanted to go all out and start moving until my body couldn't handle it. However, I was aware of what damage I could do and decided to obey blindly.

"Do you want to visit the gardens?" Topa proposed.

"Sure!" I said with a bit more enthusiasm than I had.

From what I remembered, the gardens were huge, and apparently even had some wild animals in them. I couldn't wait to see that.

"Follow me."

She led me to the door, opened for us by a butler who seemed to be standing there all day. The sky was a clear blue with sparse ghosts of cotton spread lightly here and there, as if it was welcoming the news of my healing, and shone upon us a merciless summer sun that cooked me inside of my thick fur coat. Odours were a lot less overwhelming to me than they had been when I was out in the

central garden of the pokemon centre, and I didn't really pay attention to them, but my ears incessantly flicked above my head trying to follow the overwhelming number of sounds happening all around me. All of it felt so much like summer that I was already imagining myself sipping on a glass of cold juice, sitting on a deckchair and absorbing the sun in a swimsuit. The sounds of insects cracking added to the vividness of that picture, along with birds singing, rodents running in the grass, and, surprisingly, the sound of water flowing nearby.

"That is the river that goes past the house," Topa explained as if she could read my mind. "Do you remember?"

"Vaguely. There was this thief right after you had me listen to the water so..."

"I remember. I will take you there, but not right now. Come!"

She led me to the front gate, a massive metallic portal carved like an artistic sculpture. The two pillars that supported it had both a vulpix sculpture above them, starting fiercely outside. There was a guard post to the right of the portal when coming in.

"The portal is kept permanently closed," Topa explained. "It only opens when a car is coming in or out. We are generally not allowed this close to it, but I wanted to show you this."

She turned around and sat, looking proudly at the manor. From where we were standing, it looked very small, but the building was not what caught my attention - the gardens did. I felt like I was in a big park, maybe something one would see in a castle like the ones in France. Everything in this place had been carefully designed and laid out to be stunningly beautiful. The roads were made of thin rocks that looked so comfortable to walk in I felt disappointed that my pads had barely any sense of touch at all. Between them were patches of carefully maintained grass and sometimes water with some fountains and fish in them. The front part of the gardens was at least twice as

big as the manor, if not more, but extended more to the right than to the left.

"The river is over there, east of the manor," Topa said, pointing to my right.

I couldn't quite see the water from where I was, but I could clearly hear and smell it. The park continued there, but the rocks and trees were replaced with a big field of grass. To my left were several small buildings I couldn't peek into. One was a garage for cars, and the other a swimming pool.

"We are not allowed in the water of the gardens," Topa said. "We can go to the swimming pool if a human goes there, though. Obviously we are not allowed to catch the fish."

That felt a bit disappointing, but I wasn't that fond of fish anyway and didn't really mind.

Topa then took me northwest, walking by the garage and swimming pool. Going around the sides of the mansion, I noticed with surprise that they were pentagons, which felt like a very weird design to me. One of the points of it was facing west directly, and a small wall was going from it to the solid wired fence that separated the mansion from the forest beyond. A small gap in the low wall allowed us to get through.

"This separates the front gardens from the back gardens. While the front gardens, or the *jardin* as they call it, is maintained by professionals, the back ones are not watched that carefully and remain somewhat wild."

The difference was quite breathtaking. The small, carefully cut grass gave way to a tall, forest-like maze that was almost as tall as I. Trees were not growing in a grid, but randomly over the entire area. Dead leaves and branches were paving the ground, sometimes making it difficult to walk, but the crunching as we walked along the forest floor was a soothing sound.

"This is where you will be spending most of your time outside," Topa said. "You are free to do whatever you want here, except set anything on fire. You will probably often come across snakes, rodents or birds, but worry not, they will likely flee upon seeing you. Pokemon are powerful and animals know that. If you manage to catch a rodent or a bird, you can take it to the kitchen for humans to eat, and if it is not edible, you will be given it for dinner!"

"Not sure I want to do that," I said.

"Yes, I remember we had this conversation before."

Topa took me for a tour of the gardens by walking along the fence, that was now thicker and higher. This part of the property was mind-numbingly huge. It took us more than an hour to go around it at good pace. As Topa said, we met quite a big number of different animals, but they all hid when they saw us. Around midway, I accidentally stepped on a snake, making the creature instantly turn over and curl up, exposing its belly to me and not moving a single scale. When we were far enough, it flicked back on its belly and fled rapidly. As we were walking, the water noises became louder.

We eventually reached the river. It was fairly wide, at least wide enough for no animal to dare crossing it. The waters seemed to be pretty calm, but Topa warned me against stepping into it. Apparently, it was so deep that building a fence over it was considered useless and the water would serve as a good enough protection against wild animals and pokemon. The sound of flowing water was very calming and enjoyable, and I found myself soothed and relaxed. We laid on the sand by the water for a while to allow me to rest. I was getting tired, but refused to admit it. Not moving for almost four weeks had indeed been a big hit on me. I wasn't too sure how much this body was capable of in the first place. Was the vulpix athletic?

"You can drink the water," Topa said, lapping happily into it. "This is pure water. It comes right from the mountains. You can find no better. The humans often come here to get water, because it is that much better than the ones they get from their pipes. Taste it."

I obliged. The water was creepily cold, but past the first shock, its taste left me speechless. Never in my life had I drunk such pure and tasty water. Whoever says that water has no taste clearly has never drunk source water directly in the mountains.

"This water tastes awesome," I said, unable to contain my surprise. "I've never ever drunk anything like this."

"It does! Imagine drinking it further up in the mountains. It is colder and tastes even better."

"The mountains?"

"Yes! This mansion is built on the side of a mountain. This land you see beyond the fence is a forest. While the forest itself is not as famous as others in this area, the mountain is."

"What's so special about the mountain? And the forests?"

"I will show you. Come."

Topa led me back inside. In the main hall, we happened upon Rakuen, who was cleaning the hall.

"Ah, don't walk here with your dirty paws!" she complained. "I just did the floor. Look at this, there's dirt everywhere now."

Although she sounded very genuine, her gigantic smile gave away that she was just playing with us. After cleaning each one of our paws, she petted us and let us go.

"This one is really nice," Topa said. "She has not been here for long, but she is working harder than the others."

"She's the one assigned to me", I said. "Rakuen is her name."

"Oh," Topa said. "She is the one you played with."

I looked away, embarrassed. I still wasn't too proud of it, although Topa wanted me to be.

"Come," she said. "There is a room in the second floor called the observatory. They have a telescope there."

"I thought we weren't allowed on the second floor."

"Not in the staff rooms, but that one is always open. Just do not knock anything over."

The observatory was a regular room filled with a lot of star-related objects, including a beautiful poster of the constellations. The back of the room was one gigantic glass that allowed us to see through it very easily.

Surprisingly enough, the mansion seemed to be taller than the trees around, and allowed us to see the land around us clearly. We could see the back gardens from where we were, and the fence drawing the borders of the vast area. Going further north, the forest became denser and steeper and culminated into a small mountain, the top of which was white.

"That's odd," I said.

"What is?"

"The mountain. There's no way this is tall enough for perpetual snow to be there."

"Indeed," Topa said, surprised. "That is what the humans say as well. This mountain is a wonder. The White Hat Mountain, they call it. Scientists have tried to find the origin of the snow for years, but never figured it out. They say the temperature is not low enough for snow to remain solid on the ground. As you can see, some mountains further away are taller, but have no white hat. No one knows how this snow can exist."

"A pokemon, probably," I hazarded.

Topa shook her head in a very serious manner, denying the idea instantly.

"There is no pokemon powerful enough to maintain that much snow permanently."

"I... see," I replied. "What about the forests? You mentioned a forest."

"Ah, yes. See, the forest that lies beyond our fence is nothing special, but there is a forest to the southwest of here that has been attracting attention of a lot of people, scientists included. The forest edge from here goes south a bit, then straight west, and follows very small mountains - the mountains far to the north are the tallest in the region, but the town is surrounded by hills. There is one in particular, at the edge of the town, not so far from here, that is interesting. At night, the whole forest glows a faint blue colour. Scientists think that this is caused by pokemon, but many believe that the glow is of different origin. A lot of ghost stories and rumours of evil creatures haunt those woods."

"I like that," I said. "I love paranormal stuff very much. You know, ghosts, strange creatures... Things that can't be explained with science. But... the pokemon explanation sounds plausible, right?"

"Yes," Topa said. "I believe pokemon are responsible for this. Ghost pokemon, most likely. This glow is familiar to me, I can make it happen with one of my moves."

"Oh? Show me!"

"Later," Topa said with a smile. "However... there are a lot of stories going around about those hills. Strange creatures being seen. They are said to be pale, have no feet, and float in the air. The air goes cold before they appear, and even the bravest men and pokemon flee in terror when that happens. They are generally accompanied

with a disgusting smell of rot and death, and if you only see one of them, it is said that you will be taken and disappear. They supposedly have big sharp red horns that they use to tear their prey apart and eat only the bones. It is said that those who are caught then wander the woods aimlessly as a boneless stack of flesh, seeking relief from their pain."

"Huh... that's gross. I've heard a lot of creepy stories, but I didn't expect to hear of one so close to here. It's disturbing."

"They are called the Glossy Hills," Topa said in a whisper. "Said to be haunted by evil spirits."

"Glossy Hills? Agnes mentioned that. She said that... I was crawling out of them when she found me."

"Oh? That is interesting. What was she doing there?"

"Jogging. Late at night. Now that I've heard this... how can anyone go there late at night?"

"Interesting..." Topa said, without further explanations.

We stared out the window for several minutes. I walked to the right and stretched my neck, trying my best to see the hill Topa mentioned.

"Say..." I asked. "Topa, what do you think is out there? Those evil spirits... they don't sound like any pokemon I know."

"I have no clue," she admitted. "But, you know... even in this world, not everything is explained by pokemon."

I stared at where I expected the Glossy Hills to be, then at the White Hat Mountain. A shiver travelled down my spine. It wasn't a cold shiver of fear, but a warm shiver of excitement. There were mysteries to be uncovered there, and I was very determined to find out what was going on.

Chapter 16

I kept thinking about the Glossy Hills and the White Hat Mountain for days after Topa mentioned them. Although I didn't raise the topic again, I was dying to actually go there and see for myself what was happening. I had no idea what the monsters in the Glossy Hills could be, but I was absolutely certain that there was actually a pokemon in the White Hat Mountain, and I wanted to see which one. Topa seemed to believe that no pokemon was strong enough to modify the weather that much, but as far as my memory served, I recalled that pokemon such as dragonair were able to change the weather at will. It seemed that Topa didn't know about that, and I was excited by the idea of making her discover a pokemon she didn't know.

The Glossy Hills, however, scared me. In a way, I was hoping that whatever was in there was not a pokemon but an actual paranormal beast, but I didn't like the idea of going back there. Agnes had said that she had found me crawling out of those woods, so whatever had happened to me had occurred in there. If I went back, was I at risk of being attacked again?

"How many paranormal stories are there around here?" I asked Topa on Sunday night, as we were laying on our respective pillow.

"Not that many, I think," she replied. "The ones regarding the Glossy Hills and White Hat Mountain are predominant. If there are others, I do not know them."

"That's a bit disappointing."

"Why so?"

"I love paranormal stuff," I admitted. "It's always fascinated me since I was a kid. I don't really know why. But, you see, in this world, there are pokemon everywhere, so... it's like they can explain everything that happens. But it turns out they can't and that means there's still

paranormal stuff to learn about, and that's really exciting. So... yeah, I'd love to hear more."

"I do not believe in them," Topa said. "The Glossy Hills can easily be explained with pokemon moves. One in particular: Will-O-Wisp. I said I would show you, I guess this is the right time to."

Still laying on her pillow, Topa's eyes started glowing in a pale mauve light as tiny balls of a similarly coloured fire appeared around her, producing a very odd kind of light. Although it was quite powerful and lit up the entire room, looking directly at it didn't hurt my eyes at all. Warm but not painfully hot like actual fire, the wisp she created floated around me. I was mesmerized by the light and couldn't take my eyes off of it, until Topa made it disappear.

"Wow..." I whispered, astonished.

"That was the real version," Topa explained. "It is a very strong light that doesn't hurt to look at. Also, it cannot burn, so you can't light a fire with it. The unpower version is more offensive, though. It generates a burn in your opponent, which hurts them continually until they either find a way to get rid of it or run out of energy."

"Teach me that," I requested.

"I will," she giggled. "But not today. You need to get in better physical shape. There are other moves I want to teach you first, too."

"I don't care. I want to learn that one."

"You will in time."

I pouted, unhappy that she wouldn't teach me the move right away.

"This is, I think, what lights up the Glossy Hills at night," Topa said, ignoring my pouting.

"It's pretty. I find it interesting that humans called this Will-O-Wisp, too. In my world, the Will-o-the-wisps are paranormal stuff too."

They're supposed to be spirits that light a lantern in swamps at night. If you look at the light, you are captivated, and if you follow it, you'll fall in the swamp and drown. Scientists found out that the lights that appear in graveyards and swamps are just pockets of gas that ignite, but the legend stuck."

"That is interesting," Topa said. "Do you know more of those stories? I am enjoying those very much."

I told her as many paranormal stories as I could remember, from all corners of the world. She was listening with a candid captivation, cringing at times when the story I was telling became violent. After what felt like hours of storytelling, she interrupted me with a surprising question:

"Are spirits always evil?"

"What do you mean?"

"Of all the stories you told me, there was not a single one where the subject, ghost or creature, was not ill-intended. Why is that?"

"I have no idea," I replied. "I guess if a ghost had good intentions, it wouldn't make a good story, right? Those are meant to frighten people."

"Are they. Interesting..."

"What's interesting?"

"There are so many different stories. It seems that paranormal incidents are not uncommon back in your world, but you all chose to only remember the bad ones. Why not remember it when something nice happens? Why only keep track of the wicked?"

"I don't know," I repeated. "I never really thought about it. I enjoy the stories for what they are, I never really wondered what was behind them."

Topa remained silent for a while after my reply. While thinking back about all the stories I told, I was wondering how they would be now that I was an animal. Would spirits attack animals? Was whatever wounded me a spirit too? What exactly was in that forest?

There was something else coming back in my head, something that I had completely forgotten about until then. It was in this very house, and although I never really paid attention to it, it seemed obvious to me now that it was something to be investigated. The scentless door in the mansion, in the second floor, had caught my interest once again. I knew that we were not allowed around it, but I had the urge to go see it and figure out what was going on there. Unfortunately, I was aware that Topa would not help me and would likely try to stop me, so I had to convince her to come with me first.

On Monday, Agnes woke me up early in the morning. She was wearing a grey shirt and dark blue shorts, her beautiful hair tied in a ponytail behind her head.

"Come on, Ruby, get up! Today's the first day of your second recovery. We're going out to run!"

I protested, but Agnes didn't listen. She picked me up with a smile and brought me downstairs, trying her best to hype me up, but all I wanted was to go back to sleep.

"Alright, then."

A butler brought her something, and she looked at me with a malicious grin. She had been given a leash.

My heart fell into my paws. I had been a vulpix for nearly thirty days, but it had never occurred to me that I might have to wear a leash. I didn't want to - it was humiliating and was just another way to take my freedom from me. Agnes knelt and came close to me, and I started struggling alone on the floor, expecting her to try to put that thing on me, but she didn't.

"Don't worry, I won't make you wear it. I don't want to, it's degrading and you're intelligent enough not to run away, right? Mother insisted I make you wear it, but I think I'll pass. Just pretend you wore it, okay?"

I was surprised that Agnes would disobey her mother so bluntly, but that was overshadowed by the relief of not having to be put on a leash.

"We're going to walk for a while first," Agnes said as we stepped out of the building. "Then, we'll run. Don't worry about where we're going - we'll stay in the forest behind the mansion. Don't stray and stay close to me. If you're too tired to continue, don't be afraid to tell me. Ready?"

I muttered an annoyed "yeah", still not happy about being forced to run, and we started walking. Once out of the mansion's jardin, we headed to our right and followed the fence until the point where it was furthest from the house. There, we simply walked straight north until we met a dirt pathway.

"We're going to start running now. Don't pay attention to the birds and follow me!"

Agnes accelerated, getting into a slow jogging pace. Although I had never run with this body before, I easily figured out how to do it, and had no trouble keeping up with her, but my heart started racing rapidly. We followed the pathway up to a certain apparently random point, where we turned right and went deeper into the forest. We eventually met a small bridge we used to cross the river, and ran along it until we came back the mansion, crossing the water again after passing the large building

All the time we were running, I was keeping track of how fast my heart was running. Focusing on that helped me resist the temptation of straying from Agnes to go investigate all the odours and sounds that I could detect. The idea of going away to hunt all those creatures was terrifyingly tempting, but at the same time, I was

scared of the size of this forest and of being stranded alone in it, and found myself instinctively running closer to Agnes to make sure I wouldn't lose her.

Back in the manor, Agnes congratulated me for keeping up with her. Although my heart was racing and my legs were numb, I was somewhat proud and happy of being congratulated, even though I didn't do anything special. After spending some time giving me love, Agnes brought me up to Topa's room so I could rest.

"How was it?" the ninetales asked when Agnes left.

"Tiring," I said, not willing to talk much about it. "It was just running. We went into the woods."

"Agnes never ran with me like that."

"You don't have a massive scar on your belly."

"That is true. I want to join you two next time you go running. Can I?"

The idea of having Topa with us was somewhat exciting to me, and I knew I would feel safer if she was with us. I wasn't sure if Agnes would agree to it, but I couldn't think of any reason why she wouldn't.

"I hope so! Just come with us, there's no reason why Agnes would refuse, right?"

"Right. I hope we go further than you did. I want to go to the White Hat Mountain."

"How come?" I asked, surprised by Topa's sudden interest in it. "Didn't you say you didn't believe in the stories?"

"I am not sure anymore," she admitted. "The stories you told me are too interesting. I want to go and see with my own eyes what is happening. The Glossy Hills honestly surprise me, and I am not sure going there is a good idea considering what happened to you, but

the White Hat is definitely worth checking. Maybe we can find out what is responsible for all this snow?"

"Probably a pokemon," I said, disinterested. "Dragonair can change the weather."

Topa giggled.

"What's so funny?" I asked, fussed.

"That is a myth. Dragonair cannot actually change the weather. They possess moves that can modify it around where they are fighting, but they cannot change the weather completely. If a pokemon is doing this, it must be remarkably powerful."

Topa became silent and frowned.

"How do you know about dragonair?"

"The pokemon games in my world," I replied. "Do you remember?"

"I remember you mentioned it, but I did not pay it much heed. How different are they from what you have seen here?"

"Most things are the same as here," I said. "The pokemon are the same. Vulpix, ninetales, houndour, the unpowers, pokemon centres... Of course, there are a few differences. For example, in the anime, there's no difference between a pokemon's real powers and unpowers. But... even the move names are the same. Ember, Will-O-Wisp... there are many similarities."

"That is crazy," Topa said. "However... that is incredibly convenient, too. That means that you already know most of what I could teach you about this world. Which, in turn, means that we can focus on learning what you do not already know - fighting, battling, and all those things. That is great!"

She was right. The knowledge I had from the games was an asset.

"There are differences," I said, not sharing her enthusiasm. "And I don't know where they are. I don't know what parts of what I know are wrong."

"Well, let us see. How many pokemon were there in the games?"

"Huh... over six hundred. I don't know the exact figure."

"Six hundred? That is way more than there are in this world. I guess some of the pokemon you know do not actually exist."

"Really? That's... Oh god. How do I know what pokemon exist then?"

"This can be dangerous. Do not mention pokemon names if you are not certain they exist."

"Yeah, I guess. Does that mean that some moves don't exist either?"

"That is possible," Topa replied. "I do not know an exhaustive list of all moves pokemon can learn, but I think I could tell if a move exists here or not. Do you have any examples?"

"Huh... let me think."

What in the pokemon world that I knew would not be possible to turn real? What parts of it were clearly designed for a game?

"There's one thing," I said. "But... it's weird, because I saw... huh."

"What is it?"

"In the games, trainers can have up to six pokemon with them. And... they're not wandering around freely. They're captured in pokeballs. Essentially ball-shaped cages that are about as big as my head."

"That is barbaric," Topa said, visibly shocked. "They are stuck in those little balls for their whole life? There is no such thing here,

fortunately."

"What about the symbol? I saw the symbol on the pokemon centre."

"What symbol?"

"A circle, split in two, with another circle in the middle. The top is red, the bottom is white, and the circle in the centre is black, surrounded by a slightly bigger white circle."

"Oh, that. That is not a pokeball - it is the symbol associated with pokemon. A sort of flag."

"How can it be? It's the same as the pokeballs, but pokeballs don't exist?"

Topa smiled.

"I think it is time I tell you a story."

She sat down.

"This is a legend, so keep in mind that it is not true. It is passed down to pokemon and humans alike. It tells the origin of the human race."

"Huh?"

"Hush. Listen."

She took a deep breath.

"Pokemon existed before humans ever did," she said. "On this planet, before humans appeared, there were pokemon and animals. The pokemon were feared because of the powers they held, and they existed as the dominant species. Of course, there were a lot of different pokemon, but they all cohabited and fed only on animals. At the head of these pokemon were nine unique ones. Nowadays, humans call them legendaries, but at the time, they were nothing

more than leaders. Five birds, three beasts, and the leader of all. They were responsible for the entire pokemon existence and made sure that everything went well in the areas they were assigned to. At some point, they spotted an animal species they were interested in: the humans. The pokemon back then were capable of speaking and had their own language. They taught humans how to speak, how to read, and how to write. As a result, the humans became extremely intelligent and started building tools, houses, and living in society. The cohabitation worked well until humans decided that it was time to take over and be the dominant species on the planet."

Topa sighed.

"They captured and enslaved the weakest pokemon first. Of course, the leaders were not happy with that, but they knew that a war between humans and pokemon would not be beneficial to this planet. Instead, they decided to abandon humans to their fate and stopped supporting them or teaching them anything. That is when the pokemon stopped using their language and decided to only pronounce their names, while being able to communicate with one another by different means. The nine leaders instructed the pokemon to be friends with the humans despite their slavery and disappeared. After they left, the humans progressed on their own and grew into the civilization we know today, but pokemon are now considered pets, when it used to be the other way around."

I wasn't sure what to say. That was a rather incredible story, but it rose a few questions.

"That is why, nowadays, pokemon consider themselves pets and are happy living under human rule. You have probably wondered why, with all the power we possess, we do not rebel against our masters, have you not? That is in our instructions. However, by forcing themselves upon us, humans have lost the ability to communicate with pokemon and will never understand how our powers work. I honestly believe that it is for the best. Powerless humans had the greed to capture and enslave creatures that were more powerful than they were - I fear what they may do if they gained our power."

"Do you mean that humans could use pokemon powers?"

"I do not know. I hope not."

"That is a crazy story," I said.

Topa smiled again.

"The pokeball, as you call it, represents those. The circle represents the planet, the upper red part the sky and the five birds, the bottom white the soil and the three beasts, and the black and white circles in the centre are for the one leader and his gifts of language and writing. As I said, however, it is a legend. No one really knows where pokemon or humans come from. As far as memory serves, we have always been living together. "

"Well... in my world, the origin of humans is very well known and documented. But... the games never talked about where pokemon come from. There are a few hints that seem to say that they came from the sky and that humans were on the Earth first, but nothing clearly set in stone."

"I see."

"However... those leaders, those legendary pokemon you speak of. There are quite a few legends in the game, but... many more than just five birds, three beasts and... that last one. But..."

"But?"

"One of them," I said. "At least one of them is... You see, there was a lot of hype around the pokemon games, and there even were movies that were made. The first one ever told the story of a pokemon called Mewtwo. He was created by humans when they attempted to clone another legendary, called Mew. Mewtwo had telekinetic powers so strong that he was basically invincible. Humans wanted to use him as a weapon, but he didn't like it and escaped. He wanted to wipe out humanity and leave the planet only for pokemon,

but the main characters with the help of Mew battled him, and Mewtwo gave up on his war against humanity. I remember Mewtwo said one of the quotes that affected me most when I was a child. He said: I see now that the circumstances of one's birth are irrelevant: it is what you do with the gift of life that determines who you are."

"That is very wise," Topa approved. "And, I feel, very relevant to you."

"How so?"

"You were born a human, but are now living as a vulpix. That is what I have been trying to tell you: it does not matter what you are. What matters is what you do. This Mewtwo pokemon said it in a much better way, but we have the same message."

I ignored Topa's attempt at making me feel better about my transformation and continued.

"Maybe this is it. Maybe the one that you talked about is Mewtwo."

"Interesting. So you think that the legend is true and that the legends exist?"

"Yes. And... there's more. The second movie is about three birds. No... four. The plot is that a pokemon collector tries to capture three mythic birds: Articuno, Zapdos and Moltres. Except when he successfully captures Moltres, the balance of the world is thrown off and all sorts of weather disasters happen. The main characters, the same as the previous movie, are caught in one of them and get to the island where the three birds are. The collector eventually captures all three birds and awakens another titan, Lugia, who lives at the bottom of the sea. I don't remember exactly what happens, but everything is restored. And... in the games, there is a counterpart to Lugia. It's a bird that personifies the rainbow, called Ho-oh."

"So you think that those five birds are the legendary ones?"

"Yeah. The five you're talking about. And Articuno is an ice bird. He had an entire island covered in ice. So..."

"You think that the White Hat Mountain shelters Articuno?"

"Yes."

Topa remained silent.

"That is amazing. Our two worlds have a lot in common, so if you are right, then the legend is not a legend, and the legendary pokemon actually exist. Which means... One of them lives right behind this mansion."

"Yes," I said, getting more excited by the minute.

"Then what about the beasts? Do you know those?"

"Well, if we follow the logic, all those legendaries were created in the first two generations," I said.

"Generations?"

"Pokemon games were released in different generations, that introduced more pokemon. Articuno, Zapdos, Moltres and Mewtwo are from the first generation. Vulpix and Ninetales too. Ho-oh and Lugia from the second, like Houndour. But... the second generation also had three legendary beasts. Entei, Raiku and Suicune. Those could be the three beasts."

Topa repeated the names of every legendary I listed.

"Do not tell anyone about this," she said. "This is too exciting. The legendary leaders actually existing and one of them being close to us."

I had never seen Topa so excited. Although she was sitting down, her entire body was shivering, and I expected her to start jumping everywhere at any moment.

"I want to go there even more now. We need to find a way to convince Agnes to let us go. Tough..."

Topa sighed.

"It would be best if she did not come with us. That would be... bad. Everyone knows the legend. If it is true and humans knew it, there is a chance they would try to get pokemon to talk."

"They probably would, yeah."

"There is something I like in those movies," Topa said. "Every time, a human's greed is responsible for a catastrophe, and then humans and pokemon have to work together to fix it. That is a good lesson."

"They are meant to be lessons, you know. They're for kids."

"For kids? Is it not a bit violent for children?"

"Well, the games, movies and anime aren't violent at all. Pokemon powers don't actually hurt people. Like our unpowers. Also, the pokemon never get injured in a fight. It's all sort of a... light combat system, with no real danger."

"Oh, that is alright then."

Topa was shimmering with excitement, so much so that a bit of her enthusiasm was being passed to me as well. Back when I was human, Articuno was one of my favourite pokemon, and now that I was a pokemon, I had a chance to meet one. I couldn't wait to go there and see what it was all about.

Chapter 17

The day after, as promised, Agnes woke me up early again to go jogging. She didn't threaten me with the leash that time, but we took a different path and ran a bit. To my disappointment, Topa didn't seem to dare ask to join us and was pretending to be still asleep when I was woken up. I couldn't help but look at her with sadness in my eyes, hoping that she would wake up and join us, because I knew she was looking at us with envy from her closed eyelids, and running with her could be fun - she could even tell me if I was doing anything wrong. When we returned home, I was as exhausted as the day before, but Topa didn't seem to be willing to let me rest all day.

"We have things to do," she said. "And to plan. Take time to rest, but this afternoon, let us go to the training room."

Hearing that made my heart race, hoping she would teach me Will-O-Wisp, but I remembered her saying she wouldn't yet and I knew I was in for a disappointment. I decided to rest in the living room, on one of the round cushions, until the humans woke me up when they had their meal, and I reluctantly joined Topa in the pokemon practice room.

"Are you going to teach me Will-O-Wisp?" I asked directly upon seeing her, laying by a wall, waiting for me.

"No," she replied, crushing my hopes without a moment's hesitation. "You have become quite good with Ember, but it is time to learn how to properly use it."

"What do you mean?"

"There are only about two weeks left of vacation, and you have no experience in battling and fighting at all. I have two weeks to give you as much as I can."

"Huh..."

Although I was excited about battling when I found out I was a vulpix, I remembered what kind of pain I felt when Topa hit me with Ember, despite it being an ineffective move, and it scared me. Additionally, despite resting, I was still exhausted, and I wasn't sure how much fighting and battling I could do before my body gave up. I was supposed not to overexert myself, and it had only been a few days since the confirmation that I was healed.

"We will start slowly," Topa said, as if she were reading my mind, "since you are supposed to gradually get back to physical activity. No fighting and full-on battling yet, but I can teach you some things already."

"Like what?"

"The only move you know for now is Ember, and this is a move to be used from a distance. I can at least teach you how to aim and how to dodge for starters. When you are allowed more thorough physical exercise, we can start wrestling."

I wasn't sure I was looking forward to that. Remembering my cats wrestling made me nervous about wrestling with another animal myself. Although I had fun playing with them with my hands, this was completely different. Topa was much larger than me, and I had no idea how to fight and what to do.

"You seem nervous," she noticed.

I shared my concerns with her.

"Well, at some point, you will probably have wrestling lessons at the police school, or you will be in a situation where you have to fight without using your moves. I do not know much about wrestling or battling, but I want to teach you as much as I can before you start classes."

"Yeah, I know. As a wild pokemon I'm supposed to know how to fight. But... I don't know. It scares me."

"You will learn to overcome that fear. Shall we start?"

She took a few steps back and sat down.

"How does battling work in the pokemon games in your world?"

"Huh, it's like an RPG. You select the move you want to use, then a random number decides whether or not you miss, and then it's your opponent's turn."

"What is an RPG?"

"It's a type of game. It's... too complicated to explain."

"So battles happen turn by turn?"

"Yeah."

"That is highly unrealistic. How is damage calculated then?"

"I don't know the exact formula, and you probably wouldn't understand it anyway, but... pokemon are given stats. Health Points, Attack, Defence, Special Attack, Special Defence, and Speed. Speed determines who attacks first, and each move has a given power. Damage is calculated based on that power and pokemon stats."

"Why is there a difference between Special Attack and... non-Special Attack? Does the game take into account powers and unpowers?"

"What? No. There's a difference between physical and special moves. Like... Ember is special but headbutt is physical."

"That sounds weird, but I assume it is a game mechanic. What are the other game mechanics?"

"Well, some moves are meant to reduce an opponent's stats or to raise your own. I guess those don't exist in this world, heh. Also, each pokemon has a special ability. For example, vulpix has..."

I stopped for a moment, puzzled.

"In the game, vulpix can have two abilities. Either Flash Fire, which makes it immune to Fire-type moves, or Drought, which casts Sunny Day when it enters combat."

"That does not exist in this world, I fear. No pokemon is immune to Fire-type moves. If you are a Fire-type yourself, they will be less effective, but you will still be hurt by them. Do you remember the Ember I threw at you?"

I shivered, remembering the pain that it caused.

"In this world, I suppose there is an equivalent to health points..." Topa said. "I think I already told you."

"Yeah, I remember. So... what are we going to do?"

"Well, you need to learn to aim and dodge. You can throw an Ember reasonably fast now, but that does not matter if you cannot hit your opponent."

"Can I learn to make my Ember faster?"

"Not really. The speed of your projectiles is unfortunately not controlled by you. It depends mostly on what kind of projectile they are."

"What about Ember then?"

"It is fairly slow, for a projectile, but still difficult to dodge. In general, Fire-type moves are slow."

"Doesn't that mean I'm at a disadvantage?"

"Not quite. In long-ranged fights, you probably are, but in closer range, you are not. Fire-type moves hit hard. You also have a whole array of offensive and defensive moves that you can use at mid and close range, while other types do not."

"Like what?"

"Fire Spin or Will-O-Wisp for somewhat defensive moves, Fire Blast and Flamethrower at midrange, Fire Fang or Flame Wheel at close range. Also, remember that the majority of Fire-type moves have the ability to Burn your opponent, and that is a big advantage. It damages them and slows them down, which gives you an edge at midrange and in close combat again. On the other hand, the Grass type for example has fast but weak projectiles, and some close-range moves, but absolutely nothing for midrange combat."

"Am I supposed to know all that?"

"Not really. That is more your trainer's job. They are supposed to make the strategies and figure out the strengths and weaknesses of the opponents. If you are fighting a Grass-type for example, you will want to stay at midrange, since that is where they are weakest. You can also fight in close combat, but that is more of a gamble, because both Fire and Grass have tools at that range. However, as a vulpix, you can only learn Flame Charge, which is used to move faster, either to get away or go to close range, and have few tools there. It would be best to stay back and use ranged attacks. You can learn Protect, which is great for that purpose."

I was excited. All Topa was saying about pokemon battles made me want to try my luck at one, especially if it involved that much strategic planning. I imagined them to be more like in the anime, with pokemon trying to throw attacks as fast as they could, but this seemed so much more interesting I couldn't wait to at least see one. However, at the same time, I was a bit worried that my knowledge of the pokemon games would betray me. In the games, the effect of Burn was to halve physical damage dealt by the burnt pokemon, but

in this world, it slowed them down. What else did I know that I actually didn't?

"So what are we going to do?" I asked, excited for the training Topa wanted to help me with.

"I will start shooting Ember at you and you will have to dodge them."

"Are you sure it's a good idea? I'm supposed not to exercise too much."

"This should not be too exhausting. It might hurt a lot if you get hit too much, but dodging should not take much energy. We can have breaks regularly if you want."

She stood up.

"Are you ready?"

I wasn't quite ready, and I had no idea how I was supposed to dodge an incoming projectile, but I nodded, thinking I could just figure something out on the fly.

She bent forward, waited a short moment, then threw an Ember at me. The moment the Ember appeared, my inner flame got excited again, but the fireball was too fast for me to dodge and hit me in the chest. Again, a transient extremely sharp pain that seemed to surround my body paralysed me for a split second. Although it was less painful than I remembered, the shock still left me dazed for a short moment.

"You call that fairly slow?" I cringed.

"Well, yes. There are a lot of moves that are faster."

"There's no way I can dodge this. I didn't even see it coming."

Topa moved back further, obviously not flustered by my reaction.

"Here it comes."

She fired another Ember. I reacted surprisingly fast and crouched, hoping to dodge, but the move was directed at my chest again and hit me in the head instead.

"Ow..." I complained, shivering from the pain.

"Crouching will not help much, I fear," Topa said, staying back. "You need to move from your current position. Being static will make you lose."

I groaned. As a human, on two legs, I could easily have sidestepped the Ember, but now that I was on all fours, how was I supposed to sidestep without hitting my own legs and falling over?

"Hold on," I said. "How did I react so fast?"

"You are a fox," Topa said. "You are probably faster than you were as a human. Make good use of it, although it might require some adaptation."

"Okay," I said, determined to dodge the next one.

Topa fired the Ember without warning me. No sooner had she thrown the fireball than I jumped on one side, effectively dodging the attack aimed at me.

"Good!" Topa said with a joyful chuckle. "Let us try again. I will fire more rapidly now."

She fired another Ember that I had no trouble dodging, but as soon as I dodged it, she fired another one that I didn't see coming. I rolled on my side in a panicked attempt at dodging, but the fireball she threw next hit me while I was still trying to get up.

"Let us have a break," Topa proposed, noticing I was panting.

After the break, she had me fire Embers at her and try to hit me despite her efforts to dodge. She was able to move much faster than I could shoot Embers and I didn't even come close to hitting her, but there was something hypnotizing in her movements. While I was extremely bulky and rough in the way I jumped and rolled to dodge her attacks, she moved with so much grace it looked like she was just dancing. After a few minutes, I was so mesmerized that I wasn't paying any attention to where I was firing my Embers anymore, simply shooting fireballs like an automaton to admire the grace with which she danced around my attacks. I was deeply jealous of her for being so pretty.

"I'm getting tired," I said after over an hour of practice. "I don't know if I can continue shooting Embers."

I was getting short on breath, but the feeling was located in my inner flame instead of my lungs. Creating and firing Embers was becoming exhausting.

"That is normal," Topa said. "I think we should stop for the day. As you practice, you will be able to last longer in a fight. You have done well today. I look forward to practising tomorrow."

These little games lasted almost a week. In the morning, Agnes woke me up to go walk, and in the afternoon, I spent my time with Topa firing Embers at each other. Topa was surprised to see how fast I was improving: our training sessions could last several hours by the end of the week, and the runs with Agnes became less tiring. On Sunday, after returning from our daily job in the forest, Agnes called Nurse Joy to tell her of my progress.

"She's making amazing progress," she said. "She keeps up with me very easily. She doesn't even seem to tire anymore. I've never seen her in such good mood, too."

I couldn't hear what Nurse Joy was saying, but I could only assume it was good news. Agnes came back to me, excited, unaware of my spying on her phone conversation.

"Good news!" she turned to me after hanging up. "Nurse Joy said you should be able to exercise properly now. You are free to play with Topa or me whenever you want! I'll instruct the servants to give you free access to the gardens. You're finally healed!"

"We can step up training, then," Topa said when she heard the news.

"I want to run," I replied. "I want to run and jump and swim. I want to see what this body is capable of."

"I do not think swimming is a good idea, but we can go outside."

She led me to the gardens. The sun at its peak in the sky was mercilessly heating my thick coat of fur with endless rays of light, but I didn't care. As soon as I got a chance to, I started running from one end of the gardens to the other, Topa sitting in the middle and watching me, amused. I was astonished at how fast I could run, especially since I was quite small and even running at a normal human speed would feel fast to me. I could jump about twice my height, but not very far, and landing on the hard dirt despite the tall grass was fairly painful on my soft pads. After I was done jumping and running around and returned to her panting but satisfied, Topa asked me if I wanted to wrestle.

"Bad idea," I said. "You're going to wreck me."

"The point is not to see who wins," she said, "but to give you an idea of what to do, and to have fun. Have you ever had a pet fox? Do you know how us foxes fight?"

"Huh... no. I've played with my cats so I have an idea of how a cat fights, but I don't know how foxes do."

She stood up from her laying position, stretching to wake her muscles.

"There is one thing you need to know, although you might not need it. If you are in a situation where you have to resort to fighting, you

will need to make yourself look impressive. Scare your opponent so that they forget about fighting you. Do you know how to growl and hiss?"

"Huh... let me try."

I had no trouble producing a growling sound, but I had absolutely no clue how to hiss. I wasn't even aware foxes could hiss.

"Lay your ears," Topa said when I was trying to growl. "Bump your back, raise your tails, and lower your head. You want to look as big as you can and have your head low. It makes your neck less easy of a target. You can spread your tails more, so do that. Open your muzzle and let your opponent see your fangs."

I tried my best to follow her directions, but I felt silly. I knew I was more cute than impressive, even with the growling, and I was embarrassed to be acting that way.

"Good!" Topa said, visibly satisfied. "You have good form! If your opponent still tries to walk towards you, you can hiss at them to scare them."

Topa hissed a couple times to show me what it sounded like, scaring me into a huddled up position. It sounded nothing like a cat hiss - it was more like she was slapping the roof of her mouth with her tongue repeatedly.

"Did I scare you? Sorry."

I looked away, embarrassed.

"It's funny," I said. "I never realized that before, but now that I think of it, humans do that too."

"Do what?"

"The whole... trying to impress the opponent before a fight thing. Mostly men, though. They stick out their chest, tense up their

muscles, act tough and challenge the other with their eyes, they get so close to each other that their noses basically touch to show they're not scared. Generally they also insult and try to provoke the other."

"That sounds normal," Topa said. "It is their equivalent to our bumping our back and spreading our tails. All animals do that. No one likes to fight, so if one of the two involved decide they are too scared, it is in everyone's interest. The insulting and provoking is just our equivalent to growling and hissing."

"It's funny," I repeated. "I thought it was just... animal behaviour. That humans were above that. But... they still do it and they don't even realize it."

I blushed and looked at the ninetales from the corner of my eyes when I realised that I was being condescending on her. Still smiling, Topa didn't seem to hold it against me, and quickly told me how to hiss and how to properly bark. After a few attempts, Agnes came to check on us, probably alerted by the barks, but upon realizing that we were just playing, she smiled and went back inside.

"Do not bark inside, unless there is a danger and you need to wake the humans up. Generally, that will not happen. There are the guards to help us."

"Will I have to help with burglars too now?"

"In the future, most likely. For now, I do not know. I honestly do not feel confident in you chasing down burglars, as I fear you may get hurt, but if you are interested, you are welcome to come with me. Please just stay back and observe."

"I'd rather sleep, honestly."

"Understandable," Topa smiled. "Are you interested in wrestling now?"

"I... I don't know. It sounds a bit scary."

"Let us go back inside. I will explain to you what to do."

On our way to the practice room, we met Agnes, who asked me with a smile if I was enjoying my first day of actual freedom. I didn't reply, unsure what my answer would be, and she just petted me and let me free to continue what I was doing.

"We do not fight like cats at all," she said. "Cats fight a lot with their legs, especially the back ones, but your legs are weak and your claws are dull. Your teeth are your primary weapon. If needed, you can scratch with your front paws too, but keep your back legs sturdy. If you get grounded, you lost."

"What do I do if I get pinned then?"

"You need to get away as soon as possible. You are very slender, so it should be possible in most cases. When attacking, aim for the neck and shoulders."

She poked me with her muzzle on the areas I was supposed to attack.

"If you are trying to kill your opponent, bite the vein that goes in the throat. It is a big one and they will quickly bleed to death."

"It's called the jugular," I said. "It carries blood to the head and the brain."

"I did not know it had a name. Interesting."

"And for games?"

"Pardon?"

"When I'm just wrestling for fun, not trying to kill. What do I do?"

"Oh. These usually go on until one gives up. Avoid biting hard, you are not supposed to injure your friend. Try to pin them on the ground. Do you want to try?"

Topa seemed excited at the idea of wrestling with me, but I was scared. She was almost twice as big as I, and there was no way I would stand a chance when wrestling.

"I'll pass," I said, confident that it wouldn't go well for me.

"Oh," she replied, her tone wavering in disappointment. "Alright, let us continue with Ember then. Are you rested?"

"I guess. Let's go."

I was actually still quite tired, but I didn't want her to pity me or think I couldn't handle some effort, and the disappointment she showed when I refused to wrestle with her was stuck in my head.

She spent another hour firing Ember at me at a stable pace while I was trying to dodge them. My success rate was disappointingly low, but I refused to give up. By the end of the day, I had received too many Embers and had trouble standing up.

"I think we should stop for the day," Topa said after I failed to get back on my paws. "If you get hit more, you might faint. I fear we have done too much."

"I'm fine. Just tired."

Topa stared at me with flat eyes, clearly not believing me.

"There is time before we have to go eat," she said, laying down next to me. "How is your experience with battling so far?"

"It's... fun. I mean, it hurts like hell, but it's really fun. And tiring. I can see why pokemon enjoy this."

"It might just get better once you are in a real battle," Topa said. "All we are doing for now is firing and dodging Ember. When it gets more complicated and you have Agnes by your side, you will probably enjoy it even more."

"I'm kind of looking forward to that," I admitted.

"Kind of?"

"It scares me. I don't want to... lose and disappoint her."

"Why would she be disappointed that you lost?" Topa asked, genuinely confused.

I couldn't understand how she could not associate a loss with disappointment, but I didn't try to insist. Thinking back about Agnes made me think about the Glossy Hills, and of course, the White Hat Mountain.

"How are we going to get up there?" I asked.

"Where?"

"The White Hat."

"I have no idea. As far as I know, the snowy part is not restricted of access, but no one goes there, even scientists. They want to preserve it, so there is a tacit agreement among humans not to visit it. Even tourists respect that. Nothing stops us from going there, really, but we need to find a way to let Agnes know what we want."

"Is Agnes not interested in it?"

"I think not. She has never shown any signs of it, at least. She is very interested in the Glossy Hills, however. That might be because of you. She has not gone back there since she found you though."

"Maybe she's scared?"

"That is possible. Now that you are her pokemon, she probably does not want to expose you to whatever attacked you. It is a wise decision."

"Whatever. I'm not sure I want to go there myself anyway. But..."

"We will need to find a way to go to the mountain. You will be busy with police school soon, but I have free time. I will try to think of something. For now, we need to forget about it and focus on what is coming to us."

I felt warm. The idea that Topa would help me uncover the mystery behind the mountain was reassuring, even though the prospect of going to school as a pokemon scared me, but I didn't want to abandon the idea of visiting the White Hat. Nevertheless, I agreed with Topa when she said that it would be best to set that aside for now.

We spent the rest of our vacation practising Ember together. Topa had apparently forgotten about her plans to ask Agnes if she could run with us, and the morning jogs became a bit tedious because of how repetitive they were. I could tell that Agnes wasn't enjoying them as much as she said she did, but I admired her willpower and her discipline, and I did my best to follow her. In the afternoon, after resting for a few hours, Topa and I spent our time in the practice room. The static practice soon turned into a game, and we were trying our best to hit each other, running in circles around the room, rolling and jumping to dodge. Topa proved to be significantly better than me at it, and although I never succeeded in hitting her with one of my own Ember, I was enjoying the practice a lot more than I had told her. I had become quite good with the only move I knew, much to the ninetales' surprise, and she promised that she would try teaching me more moves once I was set in school.

The Monday that came was the second of July, and the end of our vacation. It was, if my count was correct, the start of my forty-fourth day as a vulpix, and I was surprised by how much I had learnt in so little time. For the first time since I woke up in this body, I felt

confident in myself and my abilities. Although I still wasn't quite sure where I stood in terms of happiness, I was definitely capable of having fun with Topa, and I enjoyed running and what little battling I did very much. I wasn't quite confident in interacting with other pokemon or humans yet, but Topa kept repeating that it wouldn't be a problem, and I was inclined to believe her.

When Agnes woke me up, I was shivering with a mix of excitement and fear. I ate as much as I could, then simply stood in the main hall, waiting impatiently for her to come. When the time finally came, she petted me on the head and led me to the car. I was allowed on the front seat, without a cage, but still fastened with the security belt, and Agnes took the driver's seat. When the car started and passed the massive gate, I turned back to watch the manor slowly shrink away. A page of my new life had just been finished, and I was turning to a new one: police school.

Chapter 18

The drive to the school was longer than what I remembered for the pokemon centre, although we took globally the same direction. Again, I was sitting on the front seat without a cage, but with a fastened seatbelt, next to Agnes who was remarkably silent as she focused on driving. In spite of the slight frown from her concentration, she looked quite happy, softly whistling a song that I didn't recognize. I wasn't sure what she was so happy about, but it seemed that she enjoyed her classes, which was quite important for her. Looking at her while she was focusing on the road ahead, I couldn't help but think about the accident Topa told me about. How was she not scared of cars after that? How did she feel now, several years later, after she was so violently betrayed by her very parents? Although she looked perfectly fine, even with her relations with her traitors, I was certain that deep down she was still grieving. Her speech to me about the value of all lives was proof of it. Her accident didn't seem to have shaken her much if at all, but the fact her parents didn't come see her in the hospital had, probably into thinking that her life was not worth living if even her parents didn't care about it. However, the policeman that took Topa to the hospital apparently convinced her otherwise, and she took that as a life lesson, applying it to everything and everyone... and led to her saving my life.

The car stopped. I couldn't see much from where I was, but there was a group of massive buildings ahead. We were stopped before an automatic barrier, coloured red and white, that blocked us from going further. To our left was a small building, very similar to the watch tower back at the manor.

"Hey Agnes," a male voice said. "Coming in early?"

"Bit of paperwork to do, and the doctor will want to see her," Agnes said.

She poked me to ask me to look towards her. There was a man in a police uniform in the small building.

"Oh. Is that yours?"

"Yes. She will be my partner."

"About time you found one!" the man chuckled. "A vulpix, heh. You're going to stand out."

"As if I didn't already stand out before," Agnes sighed. "Can you let me in now?"

"Oh, sorry."

The man disappeared, and the barrier rotated shortly after to let us pass. I had been pretty calm up to this point, but no sooner had we passed the watcher's building than I was struck by a wave of panic that I struggled to control. We were inside the police school, and I would soon meet other people, and more importantly other pokemon. I still had no idea how I was supposed to behave around them, and what they would be like. Agnes didn't seem to realise how scared I was, and I did my best not to show it.

After driving straight ahead for a few seconds, Agnes parked her car and allowed me out. The school was a lot bigger than I imagined, at least a lot bigger than the university I went to when I was human. Amazed by its size, I didn't notice Agnes had started walking, and when I did realise, I hopped, hurrying to join her. She walked next to a building, then turned left, and after walking for a few more minutes, we ended up in front of a very large single-floored structure. There were two doors directly ahead of us.

"The building we just passed is a class building," Agnes explained. "That is where I spent most of the first half of the year. We had classes about laws and lots of theory about all kinds of stuff, but it wasn't very interesting."

She pointed to her left, showing a very long but not very tall edifice painted in a dark blue shade.

"These are the pools. There are two pools: one for humans on the left and one for pokemon on the right. We have compulsory swimming classes and quite a few other physical ones. Most of them are in those buildings - behind the pools are all kinds of specific terrain practice areas. Most of my class considers them a bother, but I like them more than the theory classes. To the right out there is the stadium. This is where pokemon battles are taught. The building on our right and behind us is another big classroom, but this one's for more practical things, like exercises and simulations. There's also the restaurant there where I'll be eating at noon."

She looked at the building in front of us.

"The door on the left leads to the administrative buildings, and the one on the right to the doctor's office. It's quite big, it's like a mini hospital. Of course, there's a pokemon centre too. It's kind of needed, with all the physical activity around here, injuries are bound to happen. There's a shooting range behind this, but you can't see it from here. It's kind of far."

I looked around me, wondering why I couldn't see anyone.

"It's 9am right now," Agnes said as if she could read my mind. "Everyone's in class. For first years, classes only resume this afternoon, so I took the opportunity to come ahead of time and deal with a bit of paperwork."

She opened the door to the administration and invited me to step in. It looked very much like what I expected of a police station, with lots of relatively small booths separated by glass panes, and an army of policemen in uniform in them. They didn't seem to notice us at all, and we crossed the corridor to reach its end. The only booth that was not visually accessible was standing there, with the word "director" proudly painted on the wooden door. Agnes knocked three times, then waited.

"Come in," a male voice said.

Agnes opened the door, asking me to get in first, then joined me and closed it behind her. The director's office was quite large, but the walls were hidden behind a ridiculous number of metal cupboards. In the wall in front of me were two large windows letting in some much welcome early summer breeze that seemed to point at the circular table in the centre of the room, surrounded by eight metal chairs carefully tucked under it. To the left of us was an L-shaped desk, busy with all sorts of papers carefully organised in a chaotic pile, and two computers. Sitting behind it was a fairly old man whom I recognized to be the police commissioner shown on TV. Under the desk, his absol was laying on a carpet apparently specially designed for him and seemed to be sleeping.

"Hey Agnes," the director said.

"Hello sir," Agnes replied.

I expected her to reply with the typical police gesture of pointing one's hand to one's head, but she didn't. To my surprise, in spite of her serious stance, she was very laid back and casual, standing proudly but relaxed. I expected to be caught in an army-like discipline training, but so far, it all seemed like a regular school.

"You're in early," he said. "Let me guess why."

Standing up from his chair, he looked directly at me.

"Hello there," he said in a friendly tone.

I was petrified. I had absolutely no idea how to behave, especially not in front of a high-ranked official. In a stupid submissive reflex, I instantly sat down, unable to look at the man in the eyes.

"You don't have to sit," he said. "Come here."

Agnes crouched to pet me to try to comfort me, and I reluctantly took a few steps towards the commissioner, going around the desk and the terrifying absol that was sleeping. After I reached him, he crouched as well, and petted me on the head. His petting felt a lot better than any I had received before, and I felt comforted enough to push my head into his hand to ask for more. To my disappointment, he stopped and sat back at his desk. Without a word, he handed a few sheets of paper to Agnes, who got busy filling them on the circular table.

"We'll talk later," he said, his eyes pointed to me.

The absol, nested in a corner of his carpet, raised his head and turned it to me. For a few seconds, he started at me, his eyes penetrating my fur and skin to look directly into my soul, then went back to sleep. I stared at him with an eerie feeling until Agnes was done with the paperwork.

"Stop by the doctor," the director advised. "I suppose she's recovered by now, but he'll want to have a look at her. She might need adjustments due to her wounds, but I'm not sure. He knows hell of a lot more than me anyway, so go ask him."

"Very well," Agnes replied in a more formal way than she had greeted the commissioner.

"Oh," he said, as if he had forgotten something. "What did you name her?"

"Ruby", Agnes replied.

"Ruby," the director repeated. "Meaningful name. I hope to hear back from you two soon."

"I will visit again," Agnes promised before we left.

When we were outside, Agnes lifted me to cuddle gently.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "You looked very nervous. You have nothing to fear, everyone here is your friend. Some more than others, but no one will hurt you. And if anyone tries to, you can be sure I'll eat them raw."

She said that with a smile, but the tone of her voice couldn't lie. I had the disturbing feeling that she would indeed eat anyone who tried to hurt me and promised myself not to get in trouble.

In the hospital building, we went straight to the doctor's office again. One of the nurses asked us to wait a bit because he was busy, and had us sit by the door. This reminded me very much of the final health check at the pokemon centre, but I felt uncomfortable. There would be no Nurse Joy to comfort me.

After at least an hour, the door to the office opened, and we were greeted by a surprisingly young-looking man.

"Hey Agnes," he said, still completely informal. "Come in, come in. Ilma isn't around, sorry. Sit here."

The doctor's office looked exactly like any doctor office back in my world, with the same desk, blue bed with white sheets, and all the medical equipment one would expect. There was also quite a lot of equipment I didn't know, probably used for pokemon care.

"Hello, you," the director said when I walked by him.

I felt strangely calm around him, as if I knew that he was friendly. While I was quite scared of the director and especially his absol, I would let this doctor do anything to me anytime. His odour was by far the friendliest I had ever smelled.

"Her name is Ruby", Agnes said. "She is..."

"The one that shown on the news, I know. The director told me you planned on taking her as your partner. I've already requested all her medical files from Nurse Joy."

The doctor grabbed a folder on his desk and opened it, skimming through it.

"Would you jump on the bed, please?" he asked without look at me.

The bed was taller than me. Unsure I would be able to jump on it, and scared of doing something wrong and attracting suspicion, I remained in place, nervous.

"What's wrong?" Agnes asked.

"Put her on, please," the doctor asked.

Agnes lifted me and put me on the bed, where I sat down.

"When did she start exercising again?"

"About two weeks ago. She spends her time with Topa, my sister's ninetales. I don't know what they do, I never dared bother them, but she's happy and I can trust Topa not to overexert her. They seem to have a lot of fun.

"Good, good. Two weeks is a bit short to fully recover from so much inactivity. If she didn't jump on the bed, she probably doesn't feel confident enough to do it. Physical training might be a little rough on her for the first few weeks. Also..."

He looked at me, putting his hand on my head.

"She's young. Very young. Maybe too young. By far the youngest pokemon we've admitted here."

"Is it not good? The younger they start, the better they learn, right?"

"Yes, that is true. But she's not physically mature yet. Probably not even fertile. This is going to be a huge disadvantage against other pokemon. Everyone here is an adult, she'll be the only child. By... quite a few years."

"We'll be fine," Agnes said with confidence.

"I don't doubt it," the doctor replied with a smile. "However, you need to keep that in mind during classes."

"I will."

The doctor looked through the file, then closed it and carelessly threw it on his desk.

"I have no worries about any of our classes," he said. "She can participate in all of them. However... I think I'll request the training be a bit less rough for her."

I protested, yelling at the doctor in an angry voice. He turned around, surprised.

"You don't want that?"

I pouted to show my disapproval.

"So you want to have the same training as the others? You're probably weaker than they are physically, I'm not sure it's a good idea."

I growled, challenging him to a duel of looks. He smiled.

"I like your spirit. Alright, have it your way."

He petted me on the head before asking me to jump down. I obeyed, landing clumsily, and went back to Agnes.

"I want to see you both again in a week, see how she's doing with classes. She might get a lot of attention if word spreads that she's the one who survived the attack. I'll do what I can to prevent that from happening. I don't think she wants any more attention. I know you certainly don't."

"Thank you," Agnes said.

After we both climbed into the car, Agnes took time to pet me again.

"How are you feeling? You've met the director and the doctor, and now you're officially my partner! I'm glad to see that you weren't too nervous. We have yet to meet our classmates though. There will be a lot of people and pokemon. Stay with me, alright?"

The prospect of meeting so many strangers was appalling at best, but I knew I didn't have a choice. As long as I was able to avoid interacting with them, I hoped I would be fine. I could blame any irregularities on my body's age or on the fact it used to be wild before Agnes saved it.

"Back already?" Topa asked when I went back to my pillow to rest.

"There are no classes. We just went for... administrative work. I was seen by the doctor, too."

I wanted to mention the absol and how much I was scared of him, but refrained. It was stupid of me to have that reaction, especially considering he was the pokemon of a police commissioner. I had nothing to fear from him.

"So you are starting classes this afternoon?"

"I think so?" I asked with a wavering tone. "Chances are there will just be a speech to explain what the semester will be about and a meeting with each teacher so they can give their expectations."

"Oh. That sounds like a good idea. How are you feeling? Do you feel ready to meet other pokemon?"

"No," I said, conscious that trying to hide my dread was futile. "I don't even know what kind of pokemon there will be."

"It is a police school," Topa said, "so the pokemon used there are fairly limited. There are very strict criteria for a pokemon to be eligible as a police partner. I was with Agnes when she reviewed

them to try and choose a partner. That was long before she found you."

"Tell me more?"

"Let me try to remember. How strong the pokemon is obviously matters, especially its evolution line. There was something about how common the pokemon is, too - more common pokemon were obviously favoured. Oh, the pokemon obviously had to be able to learn moves that would help with a policeman's work, typically incapacitating ones that can be used on people. Their physical abilities were considered too, but I cannot remember how exactly. And... I am forgetting something."

She took a short break.

"Their behaviour! Behaviour was a big factor. They want obedient, loyal pokemon. Typically dogs. Foxes work too, but they are less popular because their behaviour is not as flawless."

"So... what about me? What does vulpix have that makes it a good police pokemon?"

"Vulpix is a prime candidate, I would say! Ninetales is a very strong pokemon in a fight, although not so much physically, but we have very good behaviour by their criteria. Obedient, loyal, rather courageous. We also have a few interesting moves like Fire Spin, Confuse Ray or Will-O-Wisp. And for the ones who have some, psychic abilities are an extremely important asset, not just for Hypnosis. Also, your sense of smell is one of the best in the entire animal kingdom."

"It is?"

"Yes!"

"I never realised."

"You will learn to use it in time," Topa said, putting her head above mine to comfort me.

"So then, what pokemon should I expect to meet?"

"I think... A whole lot of growlithe, houndour, and poochyena. Some eevee, too. Probably a few other that I do not remember, but you will likely not see any other vulpix."

"Why? If vulpix is so good for police, why not?"

"Well... vulpix is an excessively rare pokemon around here. You are going to stand out. Eevee is quite rare in the wild, but very common in households. They are mostly interesting for their evolutions and were domesticated very early in human history. Vulpix, however, is not native to these lands, so finding wild ones is basically impossible. Humans can buy them from other countries, but they are expensive."

"How did you come to be in this family?"

"I was born here. My mother had already been this family's pokemon for quite a long time."

"I see..."

This made me feel uneasy. When Agnes found me, I was crawling out of a forest, and was supposedly wild, and that made me stand out even more. It also meant that I would gather attention just for being a vulpix. What would I do if other pokemon started asking me questions about my life in the wild? How would I answer?

Agnes interrupted us with a smile, saying that it was time to go. She was obviously excited, but I couldn't share her enthusiasm.

Despite my growing anxiety, I enjoyed the trip to school a lot more than the one in the morning. The first half of this day had passed by much too fast to my taste, and the car ride gave me some leisure time to sit down and think. I had already met two people and one

pokemon, and although they didn't seem to pick up on anything strange about me, I had the disturbing feeling that they knew more than they said. I knew for a fact that the police commissioner knew more than even I did about my wound, and that was probably why he wanted to talk to me later on, but I had no idea how much the doctor knew about it, and it made me uneasy. On top of it, there was the absol whose name I didn't know, and I was certain that he would get me in trouble if I hanged around him too much. Classes were now about to begin, and I would get to meet a lot of other people and pokemon, who would probably be curious about me considering what I had just learnt. It was very likely that they would recognise me as the vulpix shown on TV, making my overwhelming anxiety return, and I started praying to all the gods I knew for them not to question me about it.

My anxiety kept growing until we showed up at the gate. Once we passed it, I felt like my feelings had been disconnected. My heart wasn't beating too fast anymore, I wasn't panting, and my legs weren't shaking. I was in a strangely calm mood, as if I had exceeded the amount of fear my brain could handle and it simply decided to shut down the signal. When I stepped down from the car, there were a lot of people around, grouped together and talking cheerfully. All of them were accompanied by a pokemon. As expected, I saw a crushing number of growlithe and houndour, but also a few eevee and, to my surprise, zigzagoon. I even saw a pokemon I recognized to be electrike, but of all the ones I could see, none was an evolved pokemon.

Agnes led me to the building we walked along in the morning, but instead of carrying on, we stepped in. The first room contained a ridiculous number of lockers. Agnes walked to hers, grabbed some clothes, then walked into a separate very tiny room and changed into her police uniform. It was identical to the uniform I saw in the anime, but looked more functional. There were quite a few pockets on the shirt part of it, and a large belt with room for handcuffs, a tonfa, and even a holster. The colour of the uniform was a very dark shade of navy blue, and there was no hat.

"How do you like it?" Agnes asked me when she was done changing.

I didn't really answer, still overwhelmed by the presence of so many people and pokemon, and all the odours getting mixed into my nose.

"Hey Derek!" Agnes shouted as soon as we got out of the locker room back into the open.

She was waving at a man, a few meters away from her. He was impressively tall and muscular, and had a very typical closely shaved head and face. I had not realised until then, but all men had shaved heads and faces, and women all wore the same pony tail, although their length varied slightly. Derek, presumably Agnes' friend, turned to us. He was wearing his own uniform and a friendly smile, and joined Agnes quickly. Walking closely behind him was a flareon.

My first reaction when the flareon came closer was to hide behind Agnes. Although slightly smaller than Topa, he was significantly bulkier than she was, especially with the large mane surrounding his neck, and had a weird sort of aura that made me realise how powerful he actually was compared to me - or her. His fur was mainly of an orange similar to that of my tails, but his tail, mane, and the fluff above his head was of a pale yellow like Topa's fur. Like in the games, his ears were about as big as his head, shaped like diamonds, holding steady on top of his skull. His legs were not very large, but very muscular, and I felt like a single slap of one of those paws would send my head flying away. His claws were carefully trimmed into a dangerously sharp shape, unlike mine, that looked like a sorry mess of an outgrowing keratin tumour.

"Good to see you again," Derek said in his surprisingly high-pitched voice. "So, is that the one?"

"Yes!" Agnes said, stepping aside to let Derek see me.

I stepped aside instantly to hide from the flareon's line of sight.

"Her name is Ruby. She's... not too used to seeing so many people around, sorry."

I was ashamed that Agnes had to apologize on my behalf, but the flareon's presence was too intimidating, and I couldn't bring myself to do anything but hide behind my trainer. He was staring at me with his big adorable black eyes, curious, but was sitting politely next to his human, waiting to be allowed to come near me.

Agnes picked me up to present me to her friend. His arm stretched forward, he opted to wait for my reaction to see if I allowed him to pet me before touching me. After reluctantly sniffing his hand, I put my snout on his fingers to give him permission to touch me, knowing that I didn't have a choice, and jolted when he carefully petted my head for a brief second. His scent was particularly friendly and enjoyable, but I could feel in his hands the strength of his arms. I was a bit reassured - someone as strong as I expected him to be would be able to protect Agnes if it came to it and I failed.

"Why don't you say hello to Pico?" Agnes said softly, looking at me with loving eyes.

Seeing I had no particularly violent reaction to the idea, she put me on the floor in front of the flareon. I took a few steps back, head down, trying to put on a show to look impressive as Topa had taught me to. I didn't mean to show any signs of aggression, but to express my fears, with my tails curled up behind me almost going under my legs instead of being spread into a fan behind me. In spite of all my efforts to regain confidence, I was terrified by this massive ball of fur and muscle. Nothing around me seemed to exist as my attention was fully taken by the flareon, sitting politely, looking disappointed by my reaction. Any wrong move on my end and he would chop my head off.

Agnes knelt to gently pet me to comfort me. She didn't speak or force me to do anything - she was just gently petting me with her right hand, while her left hand stood between the flareon and I, softly laying upon my chest. Feeling slightly reassured, I took a few

cautious steps forward, and while standing as far away as I could, extended my neck protected by Agnes' hand to smell the flareon's paws.

He was male. Much older than even Topa. There were a few odours that I failed to recognize, but overall, he had the same strangely friendly smell as his master. He was clearly not aggressive and smelt extremely calm and joyful. As I was smelling his paws, he softly bent over a bit, smelling the top of my head. Startled, I jumped back a bit, but I was no longer as scared. There was no risk of him attacking me at all. He was just big, impressive... and male.

"Hello!" he said in a fairly deep voice for what I expected of a flareon. "My name is Pico."

Calming down a bit, but still afraid, I lowered my back, still ready to flee at any sign of trouble. Unsure what exactly to do, I simply answered:

"I'm... Ruby."

The flareon looked delighted to receive a reply, but kept his composure.

"Please don't be scared," he said. "I want to be your friend. My human and your human are besties, so we should be friends too."

The friend of my friend is my friend, huh? I knew I would have to befriend this monster eventually, but I didn't quite feel ready for it.

"You're... big," I said, unable to think of anything else.

"Sorry," he said, laying down. "What about now? I don't mean any harm. I wouldn't dare touch you."

"You wouldn't?"

"Certainly not! From now on, you are my friend. I protect my friends, I don't attack them."

The idea of being protected by such a strong pokemon was reassuring, but I wasn't sure what Agnes thought of it. She was still petting me, and when I looked at her, she was smiling, probably understanding why I was so scared, and proud that I was battling my feats to interact with the flareon.

"You have nothing to fear," she said. "Pico is the coolest flareon around. You can trust him."

That last sentence was more of an order than an attempt to calm me down. Left with no choice, I reluctantly assumed a more neutral stance. Pico, obviously very happy, stretched a bit before standing back up.

"Can I come closer?" he politely asked.

I nodded to allow him to, and when he took a few steps towards me, I couldn't help but admire the quality of his fur and the look of his body. He didn't come close enough for me to be uncomfortable and stopped a few steps from me. Having this mountain of muscle so close to me was both terrifying and reassuring.

Agnes and Derek started walking, and we followed right behind them. Pico would take a peek at me regularly as if to check on how I was doing and make sure I wasn't in danger. As I walked with him, I grew more comfortable, so much so that by the time we reached our destination, all my fears had already vanished, although I wasn't quite ready to call him my friend yet.

"Hello everyone," a voice I recognized said through a microphone.

I didn't realise that we had gone in the building opposite to the one with the locker rooms. It was, if my memory served me right, the one where the restaurant was, but we were in its main hall. It looked like some form of amphitheatre, with a small stage on which the director and his absol were standing.

"Welcome back to the school. I hope you all enjoyed your holidays!"

There was a wave of applause and cheering that surprised me into ducking. Pico instantly reacted by coming closer and covering me with his fluffy tail.

"Today is the start of the second half of your first year. While you will still have law classes, mostly, this second half focuses on physical exercise and will prepare you for different problems you will encounter in your career. At the end of the year, you will have a series of exams that will determine which specialisation you take next year. I want you all to work hard for this, because the exams are difficult and every year, students are disappointed."

The whole room remained silent. That wasn't a very good motivational speech.

"This half will also introduce lessons together with your pokemon as well as pokemon-only classes. One of the most important is the battling class, which will start in two weeks. Next week, we will be holding a brawling tournament to group you all into pairs. You'll keep this pair for the whole year so that everyone has someone of similar physical strength to practise with, so make sure to give it your best. Details of the tournament rules will be given to you before it starts. You and your pokemon will also be taught to fight each other. This week will focus on primary physical training, and we'll start right now with the first swimming classes. Go to the pools and work hard. I wish you all a good year and I hope everything goes right for you!"

There was another round of applause, and the crowd scattered, heading straight for the pools. As I blindly followed my trainer and my new friends, I couldn't help but feel atrociously anxious. I had no idea what to expect, and I was thrown right into classes without much of a warning. Looking at Pico, who seemed to be enjoying himself, I became relieved to have someone I could possibly rely on to help me through these courses. Considering what the director had said, at least I wouldn't be able to go through them alone.

Chapter 19

The pools seemed to be closed, as everyone was waiting in front of them, gathered in small groups chatting joyfully. I was happy to see that nobody, pokemon included, seemed to notice me, and Agnes, Pico, Derek and I could find a quiet spot to wait. While the humans were talking about things I wasn't interested in, Pico was trying to get my attention and talk to me, but I was still not very confident around him and decided to keep to myself, only half hiding behind Agnes' leg as I knew she would lecture me if I was still hiding behind her completely. The flareon's perfectly immobile tail betrayed his disappointment in my distrustful attitude, but that didn't seem to affect him much and I could tell that he was happy, his ears confidently perked on his head, and his tail waving gently whenever he looked at his trainer.

After a few minutes of waiting, the swimming instructor appeared, wearing a classical police uniform with a badge pinned above his heart. He too had a shaved head and was wearing a cap.

"Gather around," the human ordered. "Pokemon in this pool, trainers in this one. These are the first swimming lessons, so we'll be evaluating your performances before we start teaching anything. I'll give you more details once everyone's in their swimsuits in the water. Lessons last four hours, you'll pick up your pokemon after them."

There were quite a few disappointed whispers, but the instructor swiftly shut them down with a swipe of his arm.

"Swimming is all you'll be doing this week," he added. "From now I want everyone in their trunks and in the water before I come. You'll be in the pool by ranks waiting for me. Anyone who isn't will be kicked out of the class for the day."

More ranting could be heard, as not everyone seemed to be happy with these fairly strict conditions. Both Agnes and Derek were smiling softly as if they expected that.

"You have five minutes to get ready. Go to the main pool and don't do anything until I tell you to. Move!"

As everyone reluctantly walked into the pool, the pokemon stayed in place, confused. The instructor turned to them:

"You lot stay here, your instructor will be here soon."

Agnes kissed me on the forehead, asking me to stay with Pico no matter what and wishing me good luck, before heading to the pool, apparently excited to start the lessons. Derek followed her after a very formal handshake with his pokemon, but he didn't seem to share all her enthusiasm.

"Not a very friendly one, is he?" Pico commented as the area was getting progressively empty of humans.

"I hope our instructor is more friendly," I whispered.

Alone with Pico, I realised with astonishment that I felt a lot more comfortable now that I used to be, and scared anymore. I wasn't quite sure how to talk to another pokemon yet, but I figured it would be better to just do it than to shelter myself in silence. The confidence I had regained made me realise that it wasn't Pico I was scared of, but his trainer.

"Doubt they will be," the flareon replied. "This is the army, right? Discipline is going to be important."

The army?

There was a short awkward silence. The wait for an unknown unfriendly instructor was making me grow more nervous by the minute.

"Are you alright?" Pico asked.

"Yeah?"

"I don't know how you can be," he admitted. "I don't like water. These aren't going to be fun classes for me."

"I don't like water either," I lied.

The truth was, as a human, I did love water and bathing, but as a vulpix, especially with my wound, how would I like it? I knew that dogs enjoyed baths, but I didn't know what foxes were supposed to be like around water.

My thinking was cut short when I realised other pokemon had turned to me and were whispering to one another.

"Hey, there's a vulpix in here."

"I had no idea. It's the first time I've seen one."

"She looks so young."

"Where do you think she comes from?"

"I bet she belongs to Agnes."

The subject quickly changed to the recent attacks and pokemon made a link between them and me. Before I could find a way to escape, I was surrounded by a flock of curious animals, all staring at me. Pico was standing proudly by my side, staring any pokemon who attempted taking a step forward. Only a few that didn't seem interested weren't gathered around me, staying back and observing the situation with interest. Among them was a very grumpy eevee, staring at me from the corner of its eyes, completely disinterested in what was happening.

"What is this?" a feminine voice asked.

Everyone jolted and turned around, surprised to find a proud vapoleon standing a few meters away from us. She was about as tall as Pico, but compared to her, even the mighty flareon felt like a powerless bug. She had an absurdly powerful aura that even the absol didn't seem to have. Her aura was such that everyone in the court could feel it and we all became silent as tombs as soon as she appeared.

Although her voice sounded very feminine in a beautiful way, not unlike Topa, she didn't look very feminine at all. The salient muscles that showed through fur so short it looked like she had none and we were looking directly at her skin proved that she was extremely strong, but her fur wasn't the sky blue colour I remembered from the games. It was darker, as if it were dirty, but still looked very carefully maintained. Around her neck was a white fin, similar to the tissue that decorated her ears. As expected, she had a sort of horn above her skull, and the top of her head was of an ever darker shade of blue. Her big black eyes seemed to only show the pupils, and she was staring at the whole class with an angry look on her face.

"What are you waiting for? Go to the pool."

The pokemon around quickly walked to the entrance, ignoring me completely. Pico started following them, but stopped when he realised that I wasn't. Frozen in place, my terror had made me unable to move.

The vapoleon took a few steps to come close to me. Moving slowly behind her, her mermaid tail was rocking from side to side in a hypnotisingly slow swing. She had along her spine and up to the tip of her tail fin a series of small spikes, of the same colour as the top of her head. Only when she got closer to me did I realize that parts of her neck fin and a good part of her left ear were missing, replaced with a darkened scar along the edges of what was left. The left side of her body bore countless similar scars of varying width, leaving small pink stains on her otherwise beautiful fur. Looking at them reminded me of the scar that I myself had, although mine was much bigger and more painfully obvious.

"I've heard of you," she said when she was in front of me. "Ruby, isn't it?"

"Y-yes..."

I wasn't sure what to call her. Sir? Ma'am? Officer? Was I even supposed to know?

"I have instructions," she continued. "I know what happened to you, so if you feel dizzy during the exercises, you may exit the pool to rest on the side. I was told that your scar should do fine with water, but before I have you swim, I want to make sure that is true."

She blinked twice and stared at Pico, who was sitting besides me, as if she had just noticed him.

"You are?"

"My name is Pico. I'm her friend, I was instructed to look after her."

"Very good."

The vapoleon turned back to me.

"I've never trained a pokemon this young before. I don't know what you are capable of, so impress me."

She then pushed us to join the other pokemon by the pool.

As soon as I entered the building, I was hit by an overwhelming smell of water and chlorine. We were gathered in a relatively small room eerily similar to how public pools were in my world, with blue walls and floor, and a terribly cold air. On our right was what looked like a long corridor, and the door in front of me was closed, not allowing me to see past it.

"Listen up!" the vapoleon said, taking place in the corner of the room on our left so that everyone could hear her.

Conversations came to a violent demise when she spoke up, and all pokemon in the room turned to her.

"For those of you who don't know me, my name is Ilma. I'll be the instructor for anything related to swimming here, and other things. Feel free to call me Ilma or officer, whichever floats your boat. To my right there is the corridor that leads to the pools. There are several pools of different depths depending on how well you swim. What we're going to do here is learn how to swim. Sure, most of you think you know how to swim, but you're barely capable of keeping your snouts above the water. I'm going to teach you to swim efficiently so you're not a burden for your trainer."

A random pokemon whose voice I didn't recognise whispered from somewhere in the crowd.

"Easy for you to say, you have a fish tail."

"Maybe you'd like me to trim your tail into a fish tail too?"

The pokemon whimpered and didn't insist.

"If you have nothing interesting to say, say nothing. I don't expect most of you to be able to talk while you're trying to swim anyway. Most of you will never actually need to in your careers, but you need to learn how to and it is part of your courses. If you don't like water, suck it up and keep your tail between your legs and your muzzle shut. Is that clear?"

She was staring at Pico while saying that, which made him step back quietly, embarrassed.

"Who knows how to swim?" Ilma asked.

There was a deaf silence. No one seemed to have the courage to stand out after her speech.

"Alright... Who does not know how to swim?"

My heart stopped. I didn't and I knew I had to step forward, but I was too scared of standing out. After a moment of debating with myself and gathering courage, I stood up and took a shy step towards the instructor. Seemingly reassured by my courage, a few other pokemon imitated my movement, including Pico. In total, we were a dozen pokemon who didn't know how to swim. All except Pico and I were growlithe and houndour.

"Alright. Those who don't know how to swim, stay here. The rest of you, I want you to make two groups. Go in the two pools at the very end of the corridor and stay out of the water."

There was a bit of commotion as pokemon were trying to form two groups equal in numbers, but to my surprise, they succeeded quickly and dragged themselves to the corridor that led to the pools. Soon after, only the twelve pokemon who didn't know how to swim were left with the scary vaporeon.

"You go in the first pool, directly on your left. Stay out of the water and wait for me. I'll give instructions to the two groups and I'll come back to you."

She then left to follow the two groups of pokemon, leaving us alone in the hall. As soon as she was far enough, the other pokemon surrounded me again. After asking for permission, they took turns asking questions in a more organised and polite way than before. Having Pico sitting right next to me was reassuring as he involuntarily enforced a certain physical distance between them and me, and I forced myself to answer:

"What's your name?"

"Ruby."

"Your trainer is Agnes, right?"

"Yeah?"

"How did you come to be a police pokemon?"

"Agnes took me in and it just kind of happened."

"Why are you so young?"

"Because I'm not older."

"Are you wild?"

"No more than you."

"Are you psychic?"

I was unable to answer that question. Suddenly becoming anxious, I looked at Pico to ask for help, but he was just sitting by my side, watching me carefully. Fortunately for me, another growlithe answered the question for me.

"You idiot!" I heard, followed by a slap. "She's way too young to know yet. I bet she only knows Ember."

The questions became more intimate and pressing, and Pico had to intervene and ask the curious pack to leave me alone. I was glad to realise that none of them seemed to have seen my scar, and that they were nothing more than curious animals seeing a pokemon they had never met before. It didn't seem that they had bad intentions, and I felt like I could deal with their curiosity fairly easily if they managed to refrain from being too oppressing with their questions.

"Again?" the feminine voice we had all quickly learnt to fear asked.

Everyone froze.

"You lot are going to need to learn some proper discipline. Follow me."

Ilma led us to the first pool, which looked exactly like any random pool I could see back in my world, except it seemed to be less deep

and there were no platforms to dive from. The walls didn't allow us to see the other pools, but there was a person in a swimsuit sitting by the pool, staring at us.

"This is one of the aides," Ilma said once everyone was gathered around her. "He's going to take notes on what happens here, and if something goes wrong and I'm not around to save your tail, he will."

I was reassured that there was someone to pull me out of the water if I started drowning, but being constantly watched by a person as I would without a doubt fail to swim was embarrassing. Other pokémon didn't seem to mind and were carefully listening to the instructor.

"We're going to do some basic exercises. I expect all of you can paddle to safety, but just in case... Is any of you not confident they can do that?"

Once again, I was mortified to be the only one to step forward. As I took a shameful step ahead of the rest, Pico whispered to me that it was fine. However, no one seemed to be surprised.

"I wanted you separated from the rest anyway, so that works out perfectly for me," the vaporeon said. "Alright. Everyone get in, except you, Ruby. Stay here."

As everyone was stepping into the water, my bladder became pressingly painful. I was so embarrassed and ashamed that I caught myself wishing I could die on the spot. Not listening to anything Ilma was saying to the rest of the group, I was closing my eyes, clenching my paws, and hoping that this day would end as fast as possible.

"Get in the water," the vaporeon ordered shortly after the others got in.

Opening my eyes, I realised that everyone was trying to stay afloat as best they could, swimming from one end of the pool to the other.

Even Pico seemed to be struggling, which was a bit comforting, but also made me sad for him.

I hesitated before putting a paw in the water in the steps that led into the pool. Expecting the water to be ice cold, I hazarded the tip of one of my front paws into the unknown, only to realise that the water was actually very comfortably warm. I put my other front leg into the water then stopped.

How would my scar react to the chlorine? I had never been this badly injured in my life, so I had no idea what it would be like. The doctor said that it would be fine, but was it going to hurt like putting salt on a fresh wound?

"Are you scared?" Ilma whispered to me.

"My wound..." I replied.

"Let it touch the water. If it hurts, step out. If it doesn't, lean in slowly. I take it you haven't seen much water before, huh?"

I shook my head from left to right. Breathing in deeply, I took a step forward, allowing my belly to enter in contact with the liquid, expecting excruciating pain to jolt me out of the water.

Nothing happened. I could feel the water run along my scar, but it didn't hurt. The scar itself felt more sensitive to heat, but it wasn't painful or uncomfortable in any way. A bit more confident, I put my whole body in the water, trying to keep my tails out of it.

"Good!" Ilma said in a much nicer tone than she had had so far.

My fur weighed on me heavily as it became soaked with water. All my movement felt much heavier, almost uncomfortable, as I tried to move in the shallow part of the pool.

"Put your tails in," Ilma ordered. "Crouch a bit and allow the water to get above your back. Let it soak in and get used to the weight. Keep

your neck and your head out."

I obeyed. When my tails were soaked in water, they had become so heavy that I had trouble moving them. Once my entire body had captured as much water as it could, it was so difficult to move that I wondered how I would be doing anything with this added weight on my legs, especially after weeks of inactivity.

"Alright. Come here."

Ilma led me to a slightly deeper part of the pool, where I could barely keep my head above the water. Standing on the tip of my paws and with my muzzle facing straight up, the bottom of my ears was beneath the surface. Any step further and I wouldn't be able to walk with my head out of the water anymore.

"Now, try paddling to me," the vaporeon asked, standing on the opposite side of the pool. "Lift your legs up. You'll feel yourself sinking, but that's normal. Paddle with your right legs, then front legs. If you keep your body upwards, you'll float, but if you tilt it forward, you'll swim towards me."

Scared out of my mind, only the idea of everyone making fun of me for not being able to swim convinced me to take my legs off the floor and try. On my first try, I did feel myself sinking and panicked, paddling furiously to try to put my legs back on the floor. The vaporeon, seemingly disappointed, used her tail to keep me afloat and told me to try again. Thanks to the tail holding me up, I managed to lift my legs without panicking, and was brought down progressively as the vaporeon stopped supporting me with her tail.

"Now paddle forward," she said.

I tilted my body forward, bringing my snout dangerously close to the water, and paddled, trying to mimic what I had seen of dogs and cats swimming. To my surprise, I started moving forward, and after a few seconds I realised that I wasn't being supported by a mermaid tail anymore and I was swimming all on my own.

"Very good," Ilma said. "Keep your tails in the water. You're wasting energy trying to keep them above, especially given how fluffy they are, they must be awfully heavy. Don't try to move them. Let them do what they want and focus on your legs."

I was surprised by how patient and motherly she had become. It was a direct contrast with her militarily strict attitude with the rest of the class.

"Try on your own, and when you feel ready, join the others and swim to the end of the pool. Stay close to the edge so you can take a break if you need one."

She left, probably to go give instructions to the other groups of pokemon. Looking around me, I was happy to see that none of the twelve pokemon that were with me had been paying any attention to us. They'd been busy swimming and were obviously getting tired, but there was a look of determination on every one of their faces that I felt invigorating. After trying a few times to swim on my own, I waited for Pico and joined him in his exercises.

I was able to swim about an hour before I started feeling nauseous. The vaporeon who was watching us and giving advice quickly noticed and told me to take a break. Although I refused at first, I realised that it would be wiser to obey and simply sat in the most shallow part of the pool, waiting, soaking in the comfortable warmth of the hot water and panting in exhaustion. While on timeout, I stared anxiously at the other pokemon who were still exercising, but none of them seemed to care. Most were obviously exhausted but kept trying.

Shortly after I stopped, Ilma ordered everyone to gather and gave them some time to rest. After several return trips between the three groups in their specific pool, probably giving new exercises, our instructor came back to us.

"Now that you're all more or less capable of swimming, I want to see how fast you can do it. Get in pairs of two and race each other to the

end of the pool and back."

As others grumbled and obeyed, the vaporeon turned to me.

"You alright?"

"I'm fine," I said, even though I was still feeling dizzy.

"Alright, then I trust you'll be able to race someone? Go race with your flareon friend. He's been struggling as much as you have."

I reluctantly obeyed, conscious that I was probably too tired to do it, but willing to give my best and push my limits like everyone else was. Even Pico seemed to be tired and was clearly unhappy with being in the water, but even that didn't seem to cut through his enthusiasm.

"Race you to the other end of the pool," he whispered with a smile.

I grunted, trying to hide my heavy breath and the dizziness that made the world spin around me. My belly, while not painful, was horribly cramped, and made it even harder for me to breathe properly.

"Are you alright?" Pico asked me.

"I'll be fine. I'm just tired. Let's get this over with."

I counted down from three and we started swimming. Pico, being much bigger than me, had a natural advantage because his paws swept much more water than mine, which made him faster. Fortunately for me, Ilma was right in saying he was struggling as much as I, and his size didn't matter much. However, he also looked less exhausted than me, and while I was fighting to even keep myself above the water, he could reach the other side of the pool comfortably, then turned around to swim back to the shallow part while I was still trying to stay afloat, but gradually failing and sinking until even my muzzle was no longer above the water.

Ilma ended up diving to push me up and carry me back to the safe part of the pool. In spite of her low growling, she took the time to make sure I was fine and had not started drowning. Pico, worried, came to check on me too, but was harshly sent back to swimming by the instructor, who turned to me, visibly annoyed.

"You stay here and don't move," she simply ordered.

Although no one else had stopped exercising, I knew their eyes were pinned on me like a fly on a spider web. I couldn't tell what they were thinking, but I was scared of what they could say. Confined to my corner, I stared at the others, filled with angst and ashamed of myself. For the rest of the class, the vaporeon didn't bother checking on me and I felt like I was purposely being ignored by everyone, punished for my poor performance.

When the instructor finally told everyone to stop and come out of the pools, I dragged myself out of the water, expecting to be stormed on by everyone and made fun of but not ready for it at all. To my surprise, no one bothered with me at all and they just shook themselves dry as they could before going outside to meet their trainer. Only Pico had stayed with me. After shaking his body to get rid of the water stuck in his fur, he tried to comfort me, but I wasn't paying any attention and refused to let him talk to me. As he was holding a flame near me to dry my fur, Ilma harshly told him to get out, and he obeyed in a whimper.

"Hey," she said in a friendly voice after making sure she couldn't be heard. "Don't beat yourself up, you did what you can. You certainly have room for improvement, but now you can swim. So what if you couldn't keep up with the others? They're all ten times as old as you are at least. You did your best, right?"

I silently nodded, unable to look at her in the eyes.

"Why are you so grim then? Take the time to learn. Not everyone starts on even grounds here, but when you all finish school, you'll have similar performances. If I may be honest, you did surprisingly

well, too, especially considering the wound you're still recovering from."

"I'm not recovering anymore," I whispered as if I were scared she would hear me. "It's healed."

"Is it? How long has it been properly healed?"

"A couple weeks."

"Then you shouldn't be surprised you had to take a break. How much time did you have to stay without any exercising at all? Even in spite of that, you were able to last this long? I'm impressed. You have great willpower, little one."

"I'm not little," I replied, turning around to challenge her.

She smiled.

"And quite the attitude. I like you. Believe me, if you don't give up, you'll get far. If you don't give up. So stop worrying about what others do. They're not you, they'll never be you, and they don't care about your performances. Everyone is here to learn to better themselves. You're not here to be better than others. Why are you trying to compare yourself to them?"

She put her paw on my head and petted it.

"Go, now. Your trainer's still waiting."

I exited the building feeling strangely relieved. Smelling of chlorine and a very faint remnant of sweat, Agnes picked me up in a big fluffy towel to dry me. The feeling of her hands rubbing my fur, being in her arms, and having her looking at me with such a happy face made me feel a lot better about myself. The vaporeon was right - things could only get better from then on.

Chapter 20

"How was it?" Topa asked when Agnes and I came back home.

"Tiring."

It would probably be best not to give her too many details, and I didn't feel like being lectured again about feeling bad for not doing as well as others. I just wanted to go rest.

"What did you do?"

"I learnt how to swim."

"Oh. That is awesome! Agnes will be happy. Maybe we can go to the lake!"

"The lake?"

"Yes. It is a bit of a tradition in this family. Agnes, Melissa, and I usually go to a nearby lake on the mountains behind the house at the end of vacations. It generally takes us all weekend and we camp there. We did not do it this time because Agnes insisted on having you with us, but her parents refused, so she refused to go. Maybe now we will be able to."

"On the mountains behind? So... the White Hat?"

"The White Hat is not far indeed, but we do not go there. Wait..."

She remained silent a short moment.

"If we can plan a longer trip, there is a chance we can try going there," she said. "I see what you are thinking. Unfortunately... Agnes' next vacation is a long time from now."

"Can't we do it in two days?"

"I am not sure. I do not know how far the White Hat peak is from the lake. We would need to ask Agnes."

"Heh..."

I was disappointed that my idea was spoiled, but at the same time, I was excited to know that it was possible for us to go to the White Hat mountain.

"Did you meet any other pokemon?" Topa asked, going back to the subject of the classes.

"Huh..."

I told her about Pico and briefly mentioned the absol and Ilma, but I kept the details of my interactions with her to myself, pretending that she was just the instructor.

"A flareon? That is not a common pokemon."

"I thought eevee was a common house pet?"

"Oh, yes, they are. The evolutions, however, are much less common. Do you know how eevee evolves? Or how pokemon evolve in general?"

"Well, in the pokemon games, there is a system of levels that represents the experience a pokemon has in fighting. When a pokemon reaches a certain level, they evolve."

"That is fairly accurate, although a pokemon's evolution is also partially determined by age. It is possible for a pokemon never to evolve that way, though. They will not evolve if they do not want to."

"So it's a conscious process?"

"Not quite. It is more like... you can feel it when you are ready to evolve, but you can consciously decide not to. However... you

cannot decide to evolve at any time - your body needs to be ready for it. It takes a lot of patience and effort."

"How do you decide not to evolve?"

"I honestly do not know. The vulpix line does not evolve that way, so we do not have such choice to make."

She remained silent, probably waiting for me to tell her what I knew from the games in my world. It took me a few seconds to understand what she wanted.

"In the games, vulpix needs a fire stone to evolve. And can do so at any level. It's the same for eevee, kind of."

"Yes, that is correct. We do need a fire stone. However... evolution stones are rare and expensive. Even more so than regular gemstones. Having a pokemon evolved using one of them has been a sign of extreme wealth for a long time."

"And now?"

"There are no known sources of evolution stones. They are found by adventurers and researchers. Some people make a living by selling them. There are quite a few of them available nowadays, but they are still not affordable by the average household. They are not like normal gemstones, humans have no idea how they are created."

"So... Derek is rich?"

"He might be. Or he might have found one on his own, some trainers do that. It is quite the adventure setting out to find a stone to evolve your pokemon. Sometimes, I wish Agnes had taken me on one instead of her mom purchasing a stone to have me evolve."

I wasn't quite sure what to say. I had too many questions in my head regarding evolution, and had no idea in what order to ask them.

"Where do people find those evolution stones?"

"I do not know. They are... random? As far as I know, there are no patterns or consistent locations where they can be found. And they do not grow out of a tree or grow back when picked up. It often takes a lot of mining to find one. Sometimes they are found in packs. Sometimes they are randomly found on the ground."

"Are they refined?"

"Refined?"

"Like iron. Iron is found in ores, then refined into steel."

"Ah, no. They are found as they are."

"This is so weird."

"Why?"

I didn't answer. In a way, this was very amusing to me, as it reminded me very much of rare items in roleplaying games that could be found after a certain quest line, but at the same time, I couldn't stop myself from wondering what exactly they were, how they worked, and how they came into existence. Did they have anything to do with the legends?

"What about eevee, then?" I asked.

"Eevee is really special. It can evolve into eight different pokémon."

"Vaporeon, jolteon, flareon, espeon, umbreon, leafeon, glaceon, and..."

"And sylveon," Topa added. "How does it work in your world's games?"

"Well... first three use evolution stones. Espeon and umbreon are huh..."

I took a bit of time to plan my explanation to myself before giving it to Topa. The way they evolved was so dependent on a game mechanic that I had no idea how it could translate to real life.

"There is a mechanic in the games called friendship. The more a trainer battles or walks with their pokemon, the friendlier the pokemon gets. Leaving the pokemon hurt or letting it get KO'd decreases friendship. Some items increase or decrease it too. And..."

"Sorry to interrupt," Topa said, puzzled. "What does KO mean?"

"Knocked Out. That is what happens when the pokemon runs out of H... health points. The real equivalent would be when a pokemon cannot fight anymore."

"Oh. They call it knock out? That is odd. Actual fainting happens quite rarely in real battles."

I ignored her and continued.

"When the friendship reaches a certain level, the eevee is ready to evolve. Then, all it takes is a level up at a certain time of the day. Levelling at night makes the eevee evolve into umbreon, and into espeon during the day."

"That is a bit odd, but... I see how it relates to reality. The process here is very similar - all it takes is for an eevee to have a certain experience or reach a certain age, and they can evolve. That is related to what I explained earlier about being ready to evolve, and willing."

"So, wait", I questioned, suddenly bothered. "How do they... reach said experience? I see how it works in a game, where everything is quantified, but in real life, how does it work?"

"I am not sure," Topa admitted. "It... it just happens. The pokemon knows when they are able to evolve and can make a conscious

decision to trigger the process or not."

"Earlier you said they couldn't decide when to evolve?"

"That is correct. They do not decide when their body is ready - they can only decide when they themselves are."

"I don't understand," I confessed.

How could I? None of this made sense to me, especially not as a human. There was no equivalent to this in my world.

"Think of it this way," Topa tried to explain. "If Agnes were to give you a fire stone, you would be ready to evolve and would you be conscious of it, but it would not happen until you decide to. Similarly, you are always ready to use your powers, but it does not happen until you decide to make it happen. No one can force a pokemon to evolve if they refuse to."

"I... see. So I need to have the fire stone if I want to evolve, but just touching it will not instantly make me?"

"Correct! You do need to be in contact with it, though."

"How does it happen? What happens to the fire stone?"

"It is... consumed? In a way, you fuse with it. Or use it. No one knows the details of evolution, not even pokemon themselves."

"What happens when you evolve?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've evolved," I remarked. "What does it feel like?"

"It is weird," she replied. "I will tell you about it another day."

"Why?" I pouted.

"Too much information," she smiled. "I would like you to witness an evolution before I tell you more about it. It is a fairly impressive display, and I do not want to spoil it for you. Also... I want you to make your own idea of whether or not you want to evolve, and me describing the process might talk you into or out of it."

"Meh."

I was unhappy that she was withholding information for no clear reason. I wasn't anywhere near ready to even consider evolving, especially since, according to basically everyone, I was too young to even go to police school.

"Okay then," I eventually said, hiding my discontent. "What about the other evolutions?"

"For eevee?"

"Well, yeah. Glaceon, leafeon and sylveon."

"They are all very similar to umbreon and espeon, only the setting is different. Sylveon only requires to learn a fairy-type move and can evolve once they can use it comfortably. Leafeon and glaceon need to be near special rocks, respectively a moss rock and an ice rock. There are known locations for these rocks, but they are generally tourist attractions and it costs money to visit one. Even then, contact with the rocks is never allowed unless another fee is paid, then the trainer is offered a special room where their pokemon can evolve in peace. Of course, tearing off a piece of the rock nullifies its power. However, unlike the night and day evolutions, these can happen at any age, and they have nothing to do with friendship. Umbreon and espeon are never found in the wild."

"So... they only exist because of the interactions with humans?"

"It seems so. I am not sure if eevee was always able to evolve into them and it was made possible by being domesticated with humans, or if they developed these evolutions. In either case, I like it very

much. It proves that interactions between humans and pokemon are beneficial to us too."

We didn't talk much after that. We were called shortly after to go eat, then went straight to bed. I didn't even bother asking Agnes for cuddles. I was too exhausted and I couldn't stop thinking about the evolution. Did Agnes plan on having me evolve? It seemed likely, considering I was to be a police pokemon, being evolved would be much better for I would be stronger and more powerful, but would I accept? That would be another transformation, and I wasn't even happy with my first one yet. Would it get rid of the scar I had on my belly? Would it turn me back into a human instead of a ninetales?

I shook my head to get rid of the question and turned around on my pillow. It was too soon for me to even think about it, and I was too exhausted to get caught in depressive loops again. I sighed and tried my best to fall asleep, knowing that there was a rather awful week to come.

As expected, I was woken up too soon the day after, and I didn't even try to stay on my legs when Rakuen spent time brushing me while Agnes was getting ready. My floppy body and lack of reaction seemed to amuse her greatly, but I was too sleepy to even care. I was only wondering why she bothered brushing my fur when I would spend the entire morning in a pool and it would be a mess when returning anyway, but I didn't protest. Having my fur brushed was a very pleasant feeling and I even got free ear scratches in the process. Unfortunately, it couldn't last forever, and I eventually got stuck in the car that took me to classes. For a moment, I envied Agnes' ability to be completely awake so quickly, but I remembered I used to be able to do that as well - another thing I lost when I turned into a vulpix.

We were greeted by Derek and Pico when coming out of the car. The flareon kept himself from jumping at me and greeting me in a too invasive way, and I was thankful for it. Although I didn't feel all that scared anymore, I still wasn't comfortable around him, or around any other pokemon at all. This time, however, I could feel and notice

lots of other pokemon staring at me more or less subtly. Among them were a houndour who stared intently, even when I looked back, and a shy zigzagoon who immediately turned away when I caught it staring, yelping in embarrassment. I had a very bad feeling the moment I noticed the houndour's permanently angry face, and tried to put Pico between us, glad that the massive flareon was there to protect me.

When the humans decided it was time to get in their own pool to avoid being kicked out of the class, we pokemon reluctantly went into our pool's first room to avoid being yelled at by the instructor. The vaporeon arrived shortly after, and without even greeting us, barked orders at everyone. The pokemon separated themselves in three groups again and went to their respective pools. Before I could start moving, Ilma poked me with her tail and looked me in the eyes.

"Remember what I said yesterday?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied. "I'll focus on my own performances and not compare them to other's."

"You better," she retorted sharply. "No quitting today, okay? I want you to exercise for the whole four hours. That is your goal."

"I'll try," I promised.

She then ordered me to go to my pool and instructed the others to wait inside while she gave directions to the other two groups. Absently listening while she was giving her instructions before leaving, I noticed that the shy zigzagoon was part of my group. My heart skipped a beat when I started wondering if he had been staring at me the day before too and had seen everything of my nearly drowning and being cast aside for being a bad swimmer. Feeling extremely embarrassed, I joined Pico who was sitting in a corner of the pool, obviously unhappy with being surrounded with water, and pretended to start a conversation with him so the zigzagoon would look away.

As a warm up exercise, the instructor had us swim from one end of the pool to the other a few times. Although I still wasn't very confident about swimming, I tried my best to keep up with the others. Pico was ahead because of his sheer size, and everyone seemed to be struggling as much as I did. Every time I completed one two-way trip, I took a very short break to ensure that my belly did not feel cramped as it did the day before. After this, she had us race in pairs again. I wasn't all that tired and managed to complete a few races against Pico, which I lost, before my belly started being painful again. Remembering what had happened last time I tried to swim with this cramped stomach, I requested to take a break until I felt better, then resumed swimming. Looking to the side, I noticed that the aids were taking notes on what happened and one of them probably seen my unauthorized breaks, but that didn't bother me. At the end of the four hours, I was exhausted, but I had kept my promise.

"Very nice," Ilma congratulated me when we were all stepping out of the water. "You lasted all four hours."

"I took a break," I confessed. "My belly started hurting too much and I had to stop."

"So?" the vapoleon asked with a smile. "I didn't say you had to last all four hours without any breaks. You didn't overwork yourself and were able to understand when you needed to stop. That is good. It means you know restraint, and that will be extremely important in your future career. Don't worry about your physical performances, you will be doing much better by the end of the training. We don't ask anyone to swim like fish. We only ask that they do their best, and you did. Keep it up."

I went back to be dried up by Agnes in a fantastic mood. She did notice and was herself pretty cheerful.

"We're going to have lunch," she said, putting me down after drying my fur as she could. "Pokemon are not allowed in the cafeteria,

unfortunately, so I have to ask you to wait for me. Stay with Pico, this won't take long."

Watching her leave without me made my heart ache, but I knew it was only temporary and decided that I could accept it.

The bigger problem was that now that I was alone with Pico, I was barely taking measure of how many pokemon were in this school. I had not been paying attention to that before, but I could see swarms of them coming out of buildings. The ones that weren't leaving with their trainer seemed to be gathering inside the stadium building.

"We're going there," Pico explained, noticing that I was looking at it. "Pokemon generally wait there while the humans eat. Come."

I followed him closely, quite scared of the sheer number of pokemon around. To my surprise, the gym was exaggeratedly big and could probably have contained several football fields, and there was more than enough room for every pokemon. Most were gathered in groups, chatting happily. Some were playing together, racing one another from one point of the building to another, wrestling, or comparing their powers. The atmosphere in the gym was extremely light-hearted, and although it was quite noisy, I felt more comfortable in it than I did outside.

Pico and I sat by one of the walls, rather isolated. From that position, I could see all other pokemon, and was happy to notice that none of them were paying attention to me. I recognized the grumpy eevee again, who was laying alone in a corner, and saw a few pokemon I would not have expected to see in a police school: electrike and meowth. I also fleetingly noticed another eevee, but that one seemed to be more outgoing and was joyfully chatting with a group of growlithe. The proportion of dog pokemon, houndour and growlithe, was absurd. Apart from Pico, I couldn't see any evolved pokemon around, which made me understand why the flareon was so respected in the school. As I was told, I was the only vulpix in the entire building.

After idly chatting with Pico for a few minutes, he stood up, saying that he had something to do, and promised to be back shortly. I felt insecure watching him go, but with all the commotion around and no one paying attention to me, I shrugged the feeling off and tried to take a short nap.

I didn't get much time to try to fall asleep, as one of the houndour who was racing other pokemon around the building interrupted his game to come talk to me. I instantly recognized the houndour who was staring at me earlier.

"Hey," he greeted me when he was close enough not to have to shout. "Excuse me. Do you mind if I join you?"

"Heh, sure," I answered, trying to hide the fact that I would rather have been alone.

He sat by my side. "You're new here, right?"

Out of courtesy, I sat down as well, and answered:

"Yeah."

"I've never seen a vulpix before," he admitted, not hiding his curiosity. "Where are you from? How did you come to be a police pokemon?"

I didn't know what to answer exactly for the first question, and quickly decided to give a vague answer to keep the conversation going and avoid giving him any suspicions.

"I was wild until Agnes rescued me, so... it just kind of happened."

"Rescued you? So you're the vulpix that was shown on television?"

I cringed. I would have slapped myself for giving away that information if I could have. It was too late to undo it now, and I had to roll with it:

"Yeah, that's me."

"Wow... so you..."

He vaguely gestured towards my belly. I sighed, bringing my legs closer to my body to make sure to hide the scar. My instincts being in full alarm made me uneasy. Something about this houndour was off.

"Impressive that you survived it," he commented. "You know, at least eight other pokemon died from this. You should consider yourself lucky."

"I would have been lucky if I didn't have this wound," I replied rudely, getting annoyed.

"And you're so young and so weak. Others who were much stronger than you died, you know."

"Yeah? It's not my fault."

I was getting feelings that I couldn't even interpret. The houndour was becoming more pressing and had stood up, slowly closing in on me. I had not noticed, but I had stood up as well, walking back to try to keep a certain distance between us two.

"Yet, you survived," he insisted. "I know someone who didn't."

"Pardon?"

At that exact point, I felt my rear hit the wall. I couldn't retreat any further and I was starting to feel genuinely scared.

"The ninth victim, the houndour who died in the pokemon centre. She was my sister."

I had not paid attention to it, but after he mentioned it, I realised that he had a very similar odour. Remembering the houndour's eyes as she was dying made my heart race. I started breathing heavily.

"So? I had nothing to do with it. It's not my fault. What do you want?"

He didn't answer. I understood that it was about time for me to leave, but as soon as I tried to take a step, he would step on the side as well to block me.

"What are you doing?" I asked, unable to hide my fear anymore.
"What do you want? Let me go."

I knew what was going to happen. I was desperate to find a way to prevent it, but I knew I wouldn't be able to. Looking around me in search for some help, I realized that no one had noticed what was going on, and felt mortified that no one was paying attention to me.

"Are you scared?" the houndour asked, abandoning his falsely nice character to display an evil condescending smile.

"Yeah. Why are you doing this? Go away. Let me go."

I tried dashing away, but the houndour reacted surprisingly fast and stopped me. Still displaying his condescending smile, he was perfectly aware that he was in a commanding position and was enjoying his control. I was thinking as fast as I could, trying to find a solution to escape. I was a human - surely I could outsmart a mere dog.

I faked a dash to my right, towards the wall and away from the entrance. As expected, the houndour fell for it and dashed in the same direction, trying to block me. Capitalising on his stumbling, I instantly started running away from him, following the wall.

I had not been in this state of panic since the houndour's trainer, in the pokemon centre, had tried to strangle me. I felt like I was reviving this as I was running away, possibly for my life. I could see his eyes riveted on me as he was trying to kill me because I had survived what his pokemon did not - and now the pokemon's own brother was about to do the same. In a state of pure terror, I tried looking behind me to check how well the houndour was keeping up.

That was a mistake. I instantly tripped and crashed my muzzle into the ground, before rolling on my back and landing on my side. The houndour, seemingly very satisfied, jumped at me, all teeth out, aiming for my throat. I turned my body around so my tails were facing him, and as he landed on my four legs, I pushed my whole lower body up while giving a kick as powerful as I could. This successfully sent my aggressor flying away and crashing on the ground as well. While he was stunned, I got up as I could, but my lower belly was being very painful and slowing my movement down, and I did not have time to run before he got up and charged again. He hit me in the torso with the shiny part of his head, which felt like bone, making me whimper in pain as I felt my ribs move from the power of his attack. My body got carried for a very short moment before he threw me upwards. I landed behind him as he turned around, and he jumped at me again, one of his paws pushing onto my throat as he was trying to claw it. Pinned on my back, I did what I could to push him away with my legs, but he was physically too strong and I knew I wouldn't be able to stop him for much longer. Remembering my martial art classes, I stopped pushing him with my back legs and swiped his instead by swinging my entire lower body horizontally. As he lost balance, I kicked his muzzle to push myself out of the way and turned onto my belly. Unfortunately for me, he had no trouble catching up and crushed my head against the floor with one of his front legs, then leant forward and bit one of my ears, making me whine again when his fangs pierced my skin. Struggling to get away, I managed to make him lose balance again, a tearing form of pain paralysing my ear as I tore it when I violently pulled my head out of his muzzle. Crying both from the pain and panic, I tried to crawl away, but he head butted me again, making me roll on my side, and I landed stomach up. He jumped at me teeth out and bit one of my front paws as I was throwing them forward to try to stop him. I emitted another whine, much louder this time, and tried kicking his belly with my back legs as I saw my cats do when they were playing. Unfortunately, I had no energy left and my kicks were doing nothing more than gently caressing his body. Pushing my front legs down with his, he let go of my paw and aimed for my throat again. The moment I expected him to bite me, he was sent flying, and

without thinking, I crawled behind the pokemon who had just saved me.

It was Pico. He was standing in the same position Topa had shown to me, looking terrifyingly impressive and growling, with me hiding under him and crying. The houndour that had just been pounded away was having trouble standing up, unsure exactly what happened. When he noticed Pico was in a very aggressive stance against him, he didn't insist, and fled without a word. Other pokemon were starting to gather around, trying to check on me, but none dared get any close to us. A few of them gave chase to my aggressor. Stunned and dizzy, I didn't notice the hands picking me up, but I immediately recognised Agnes' scent and stopped moving altogether. I was just crying, shaking widely, glad to know that I was finally safe.

Chapter 21

"You're fine now," Agnes whispered, hugging me tightly.

"Pico!" Derek called as he rushed to his pokemon.

The commotion had gathered many trainers around, most of them joining their pokemon to make sure they were safe before switching their attention to me.

"You," Agnes barked at one of them. "Go get the doctor."

Agnes stopped hugging me to inspect me. She didn't react to the blood oozing out of my ear and paw, whispering softly in my ear and keeping her hands on me to calm me down. The fact that I was in her arms, away from any danger, and that Pico was around to protect me helped me relax, and although I was still shaking from a mix of pain, fatigue, and panic, I was able to think clearly and control myself.

"Is she alright?" Derek asked after making sure that Pico was not injured.

Agnes turned her body around slightly to hide me from even her friend's eyes. "She is wounded."

Pico didn't try to check on my state. Sitting behind Derek, his tail and ears down, he occasionally raised his eyes but would look away as soon as I looked back.

"What happened?" a male voice I didn't know asked. "Where is Fenrir? Agnes, is that your vulpix?"

It didn't take long for the boy to connect the absence of his pokemon to my wounds.

"Did... oh god. I..."

He gave a hint of several hand movements towards Agnes and I, but stopped himself every time. His eyes and mouth wavering in dismay, he apologized to Agnes before running off to find his pokemon.

"What is going on here?" the doctor asked.

Hearing his voice made me happy. As Agnes hailed for him to come to her and carefully laid me on my back, he ran to me, students respectfully stepping out of his way. After a quick glance at me, the vet told Agnes to bring me to his office, and shouted at everyone else to scatter and go back to their businesses. Derek was not allowed to follow us.

Back in his office, Agnes gave me to the doctor for examination. After a few painful and uncomfortable minutes during which I let him do whatever he wanted to me, he checked my heart, belly, and my wounded paw and ear, and eventually sighed.

"She's fine," he announced, relieved. "Scared and hurt, but not in danger. Her belly didn't suffer any hits either. Her paw is going to need more attention than I can give, so I'll bandage it and focus on the ear for now. Call the pokemon centre and get us a veterinary vehicle."

I could feel him move part of my ear around as Agnes was pulling her phone and calling an ambulance. The teeth of the houndour, as I tripped him, had cut two parallel slices of my ear, and there was a rectangle of it that could flop around one axis. I could feel it rub against the rest of the ear as the doctor was repositioning it properly.

"Why is she bleeding so much?" Agnes asked after her phone call, visibly worried.

"The ear is very thin but has numerous blood vessels," the doctor explained while looking into his cupboards. "It bleeds very easily. The two tears have cut through the marginal ear vein."

"Is it bad?"

"Nothing serious, really. Ear wounds are always minor. Normally, I would cauterize around the veins and let the ear heal with scar tissue, but she's a vulpix and it's going to be difficult to burn her skin. I'm going to stitch instead."

He went to his cupboards, looking for something in them, and came back to me shortly after. Although he took time to pet me to reassure me while putting something wet around my ear wound, his words did the opposite:

"You're not going to like this. I need you to stay as still as you can. The ears are around the most sensitive parts of the body."

The first time I felt the suturing needle pierce my skin, I jolted so much that I nearly jumped off the table I was standing on, were it not for Agnes holding me strongly but with care. I managed to stand where I was for the other punctures, but it was an extremely unpleasant experience. In total, he gave me four stitches - two deep into the ear, probably near the ruptured veins, and two at the edge to keep the skin properly aligned.

"This will heal rather quickly," he said. "We'll need to bandage the area. We generally bandage the entire ear around the head, but..."

The doctor looked at me.

"You wouldn't like that, would you?" he asked, not actually expecting a response. "I'll make you another bandage that won't slap your ear against your head. You'll need to change it every other day," he added to Agnes. "For her wrist, she's going to need a set of exams. Depending on what happened, it might be pretty bad. The nurses at the pokemon centre will give you more information."

He cleaned and bandaged my injured wrist before petting me on the head and telling me I'd be fine. Ordering Agnes to wait in the office, he went outside to guide the ambulance to me whenever it arrived.

"Hey Ilma," Agnes suddenly said.

Turning around, I realised that the Ilma Agnes was talking about was none other than the swimming instructor. She jumped onto the table to face me. I couldn't contain my surprise:

"Wait, you're his pokemon?"

"Yes," she replied in a smile. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm wounded," I noticed. "It hurts."

"I know," she said, pointing nonchalantly at the missing piece of fin on her left ear. "Be happy your ear is still whole."

"It's not funny," I pouted, sounding a lot more upset than I meant to show.

Ilma lost her smile and started looking serious.

"What happened?" she asked.

I told her about the stalking houndour and how he had slowly gone from curious classmate to physical aggression. I glossed over the fight, simply saying that had had tried to kill me and I was trying to flee.

"So you've done nothing that could have made him angry?"

I understood that it was sort of a routine question, but the moment she asked it, I felt like my stomach was turned inside out. Tears grew in my throat and I simply roared:

"Yeah, I have this ugly-ass belly wound, clearly this is my fault, how dare I live?"

The vaporeon seemed to be taken aback by my reaction, but didn't lose her composure.

"Alright," she simply announced. "Wait for the ambulance now, and don't put your paw on the floor. For your ear, you might want to avoid

flapping your head or moving too much. I assume I won't be seeing you in class for the rest of the week, so we'll need to find a way to catch up. Oh, and the next time you talk to me like that, I will drown you."

A terrified yelp escaped me as I looked away, too scared to even apologise. I couldn't bring myself to say a word until the ambulance was here to take me away.

Once in the pokemon centre, I was directly taken to a small x-ray machine, where the nurses took pictures of my injured wrist. I was disappointed to notice that Nurse Joy wasn't the one to take care of me this time, but she was the one to come back with the x-rays.

"I have good news," she announced, showing the dark paper to Agnes. "She's avoided a lot of trouble. The bite is fairly deep and around the wrist, which could have led to very serious structural damage. Fortunately for her, there doesn't seem to be any. Her bone is fine, the tendons aren't damaged, and there's no tearing around the wound. However, wrist wounds tend to lead to joint infections, and those are pretty bad. I'm going to put her on high doses of antibiotics and pain medication for a week. If her paw is still swollen after that, you need to bring her back here. The puncture wounds will heal on their own quite quickly, so there should only be minor inconveniences to her mobility. She will know on her own when she can start using her paw again, but once again, avoid exercising and water for a week. You'll need to wash the wound and change the bandage every other day."

"Thank you," Agnes replied.

"She's going to be in a really bad mood for a few days," Nurse Joy continued. "She will be in pain, even despite the medication. She might refuse to eat, but don't worry if she does. Don't force her to."

She turned to me.

"Can I move your paw around to check on it?"

I let her grab my injured paw and move it around to make sure there was no problem. That was quite painful, but I clenched my teeth and remained silent. She was right in thinking that I would be in a bad mood, but I also felt really weary and quite overwhelmed. After giving a few more directions to Agnes, the nurse left, and we left the pokemon centre. A police car was waiting for us outside and took us back to the school. The driver explained that we were to be met by the director to hear the decisions made about the incident.

Derek, Agnes, the houndour who attacked me, and Pico had all been summoned to the director's office, and we were waiting inside by ranks, pokemon sitting by their trainers. Agnes had carried me into the building and when I got to sit on the floor, I figured it would be best not to put any strain on my wrist and kept it from touching the floor. Derek and Pico were wisely placed in the middle. I could feel the houndour's burning hate towards me and Pico's silent anger, which made the situation extremely awkward. Agnes didn't seem to be angry at all, and the houndour's trainer was confused and very apologetic.

No sooner had the director appeared at the door than the humans froze in a respectful salute. Unsure what I myself had to do, I peeked at the other two pokemon. They were sitting in a dignified position, flexing muscles, which I did my best to replicate. No one moved a hair until after the director's absol joined in and sat by his master, who simply ordered:

"At ease."

The atmosphere was very different from the friendly, relaxed one I noticed when I had first come in this office. It was very clear that this was a very serious situation, and proper discipline was to be expected from everyone.

The school's doctor and his vaporeon joined shortly after and stood by the director.

He sighed.

"Let me make it clear," he announced. "Never in this school have two pokemon been caught fighting like this. You're setting an unprecedented event, and not a good one at that. I hope you're aware of it."

There was no answer. Quiet gulps escaped from the humans as they forced themselves to look the director in the eye.

"Now, we don't know exactly why this happened, but we know what happened. Based on the report I was given by Doctor Belish and his vaporeon Ilma, the situation is clear. Neither Pico nor Fenrir show any form of injury whatsoever, not even a bruise, while Ruby had to be taken to the pokemon centre in emergency. There are traces of blood in the stadium and I don't think you'd be surprised to learn who it belongs to. Considering the fact that your houndour was given chase and apprehended by several pokemon while Pico stayed with Ruby and was clearly protecting her, it's pretty obvious that this was an aggression."

The director stared at the houndour's trainer.

"Any explanations?"

"I don't know, sir," he instantly replied, become stiff as a stick. "Fenrir has never acted like this before. At least not before his sister's death."

The doctor intervened:

"His sister is the houndour that died in the pokemon centre almost two months ago, right?"

"Yes, sir. We've only been able to give her a proper burial last Saturday. The police were denying that for their investigation."

The director and the doctor met eyes for a short moment.

"Very well. Since this is clearly a case of aggression, you'll be considered fully responsible for the events."

"Yes, sir," the houndour's trainer muttered in a hiccup.

"However, considering the circumstances, I don't think a full punishment is in order, at least for you. You're suspended for a month. Mourn the death of Fenrir's sister, spend some time with him, and come back anew. You're also tasked with moping the stadium to get rid of the blood your pokemon spilled. Fenrir will be sent to canine training section starting next week."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"Derek," the director said, turning to Agnes' friend.

"Sir!"

"Your pokemon's intervention may very well have saved Ruby's life. He was able to drive the aggressor off of her and show enough restraint to stay by her side until she was safe. He and the pokemon who gave chase to Fenrir are to be commended on their behaviour."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're off the hook for this one. Make sure that Pico stays around Ruby at all times."

"We will, sir. Thank you."

"Agnes."

"Sir?"

"Ruby clearly is a victim in this issue, so there will be no punishment for you either. She will need to rest until her wounds heal, so you may take the week off if you so desire and spend that time with your pokemon."

Agnes looked at me, as if to ask for my approval. I shook my head from left to right. I couldn't let her miss classes because of me. Hesitating a few seconds, she nodded and turned back to the director:

"Thank you, sir. With all due respect, I must refuse. I am in perfect health condition so I can continue my training. Ruby agrees with me."

The director looked at me, visibly surprised by my decision.

"Very well," he concluded after a few seconds. "Dismissed."

As we were about to leave the door, Doctor Belish tapped on Agnes' shoulder.

"Bring Ruby in tomorrow, please. I think Ilma would like to see her."

The vaporeon confirmed in a nod.

"Very well," Agnes said before lifting me up and taking her leave.

"Are you alright?" Agnes asked me once we were in the car.

I nodded. I was, for the most part, actually alright, now that I had time to digest all the feelings, and although my body was horribly painful, I was strangely excited. It was probably just the adrenaline rush that wasn't gone yet, but I had a lingering feeling that I couldn't describe. Promising myself to dwell on it and try to identify it, I laid as I could on my seat as Agnes drove home, petting me at every chance she had. She didn't let me walk from the car to the mansion and carried me straight to my pillow, where Topa met me with worried eyes.

"Are you alright? What happened?"

"Later," I said, grumpy and exhausted. "I'm tired, I want to sleep."

I said that as an excuse to have some time alone to be able to process what happened. Topa probably guessed it and agreed to leave me.

I was lost and humiliated. I didn't understand why the houndour's loss had brought him to attack me. It surprised me even more because it was absolutely not something I would have expected of an animal, as I wasn't even certain they understood the concept of death. Pokemon obviously did understand it, but even then, there was no reason to attack me unless he considered me responsible for his sister's death, as if I had killed her myself.

Was that what he actually thought? Was that what others might think too? How could they even reach such conclusion when I myself had been a victim of the same attack as she, except I survived and she didn't? Did the mere fact that I survived make me guilty? Did that houndour, and possibly others, think that I did not deserve to live? Should I have been feeling guilty of surviving? What did I even think about that? The houndour was now the second one to try to kill me because I survived something another pokemon died of, following his sister's trainer. Should I expect more people to try it? If that was the case, then I needed to learn how to defend myself as soon as possible, or I wouldn't last very long in this world.

And then, what happens? What if I died? Would I turn back into a human? Would I turn into something else? Would I... simply die?

My sensitive ears picked up quiet footsteps, and I noticed Agnes standing at the door, silently staring at me. I was pretending to sleep and didn't raise my eyes to her, but I could hear her sigh. As she switched the lights off before leaving, she whispered:

"You and I are going to have a tough life together. I hope you can handle it."

I was woken up the morning after by Agnes, who was gently stroking the top of my head, carefully avoiding my wounded ear.

"Hey Ruby, how are you feeling?"

I felt a lot less excited than the day before, but surprisingly, I didn't feel particularly depressed or upset. Although my paw and my ear were really painful, I was physically rather well, albeit annoyed that I had to spend yet another week in bed. Trying to reassure my trainer, I joyfully responded.

"Ilma said she wanted to talk to you, remember? I'll take you to her this afternoon, but until then, you can rest all you want. I'm going to carry you downstairs so you can eat something and take your medicine, okay?"

I nodded and she did what she said. When eating, I noticed that pills had been mixed with my food, but I didn't feel offended by it. It just made it easier for me to take them. I wasn't too sure what they were, but I remembered the nurse talking about painkillers, and considering the state of my paw particularly, I was more than happy to take them. After I was done eating and Agnes left, Rakuen carried me back to my pillow and spent some time brushing as much of my fur as she could reach. She didn't look very worried, but at the same time, she was being very careful. Finally, the humans left me alone, and Topa joined me in the room.

"How are you feeling?" she asked again.

"I'm... fine," I replied after a short hesitation. "And I mean it. My leg and my ear hurt, but I'm not depressed or upset. Just... a bit lost."

"What happened?"

I described to her the events of the day before, trying to be as accurate as possible. She listened very carefully, especially when I described the fight, and didn't interrupt me at all. After I was done, she waited a few minutes, seemingly thoughtful, before saying:

"I am surprised this did not upset you more than that. It seems you are a lot less depressed than you were just a week ago."

"Yeah, I don't know. I don't feel depressed. I mean... I still don't know why I turned into a vulpix and it still bothers me, but I've pretty much come to terms with it. Gotta live on, right?"

She smiled.

"It does me good to see some positivity from you. So, tell me, what did you learn from this?"

"The aggression?"

"Yes."

"Well... I suck at fighting. He completely dominated me, I didn't stand the slightest ghost of a chance. Pico saved my skin there. I owe him."

"That is not what I think," she replied.

"I don't owe him anything? He saved my life."

"Not that. I think you did extremely well in the fight. You said you managed to throw him to the ground twice, is that correct?"

"Yeah?"

"That is quite the feat, especially when the strength difference is so big. You also had a lot of good reactions. Trying to turn on your belly to stop him from accessing your throat was a wise move if you knew you stood no chance of winning. How did you make him fall twice?"

"I just... applied stuff I learnt as a human from martial arts and it worked."

She nodded.

"We need to wrestle."

"I can't," I replied, waving my wounded paw at her.

"Not now. When you are allowed to exercise again, we need to wrestle. You need to learn how to fight. I am not very good at it, but any experience will do you good."

"I'd rather learn how to battle," I pouted.

"That, too. We have a lot to do. How soon will you be allowed to exercise again?"

"Nurse said about a week, but I don't think I'll need to wait that much."

"Alright. As soon as you feel confident about the state of your paw, tell me."

"When will I learn more moves?" I whined.

"After you learn how to use Ember in a battle, I will teach you other moves."

I pouted. I was looking forward to learning more moves, and I felt like using only Ember was going to be a sizeable disadvantage. I couldn't wait to learn Will-O-Wisp myself and make my own shiny blue wisps.

The whole morning was excessively boring. Although I didn't feel much pain anymore thanks to the medication, my paw was still very stiff and tense and it made me very irritable. The humans had obviously been warned and avoided me, even Rakuen despite her tendency to be clingy ever since I allowed her to pet me. I couldn't even walk to go to the pokemon training room and release my nerves in flames. While I was stuck in her room, Topa regularly came to check on me, but we didn't talk much, and I was exhausted and weary in spite of all the rest I enjoyed. All I wanted was for these new wounds to heal so I could go back to exercising. I even caught myself looking forward to swimming lessons again.

Thinking back about them, I realised that I had grown to like Ilma, and was wondering what she wanted to talk about. She was likely going to question me about my mental or physical state after the fight. Would I be wrong to confide in her? I was hiding my thoughts even from Topa, whom I knew loved me too much to be truly objective, but would the vapoleon be able to think more objectively? If so, was she intelligent enough to be able to answer my questions and help me with my thought process? Would it be a mistake to talk to a teacher about my problems?

I wasn't sure what to do anymore. I didn't want to bother Topa with what I was thinking, but I knew I needed to talk to someone. Of all the people and pokemon who could have tried to talk to me or get me to talk to them, Ilma was the first one to have come forward.

I shook my head. If I couldn't make a decision, there was no point in dwelling on questions that couldn't be answered. All I needed was to wait and decide as I was talking to her. I wasn't sure if I could trust her, and there was only one way to find out.

Chapter 22

I spent the entire morning in the pokemon practice room, firing Ember at a wall under Topa's careful eye. Her absence of comments on my Ember made me think that she wasn't really watching my performances, but making sure that I wasn't overexercising and hurting my paw. Although I could put it on the floor without pain, I wasn't sure if that was because of the painkillers and didn't dare put any weight on it, which made me hop with my back legs whenever I needed to walk, my wounded paw lifted pitifully above the ground. Topa was following me around most of the time, helping me whenever I needed to, and although I was secretly thankful for that, I was also annoyed by the complete loss of privacy. Overall, as the doctor predicted, I was fulminating with rage, but being aware of it, I was able to control myself and not lash out unfairly at anyone. Throwing balls of fire at mattresses on a wall helped me vent out some of that anger, but I knew it wouldn't be enough. I had feelings that I was unable to identify and control, and those were certainly responsible for my current state of rage.

"When are we going to start practising?" I complained to Topa, short on breath.

"When you are better."

"I need to learn how to fight before next Monday," I insisted. "There will be the brawling tournament and I don't want to humiliate myself."

"Brawling tournament? Humiliate yourself?"

"The school will host a brawling tournament to sort us by level. I don't want to go and get ridiculed by everyone else."

"You should not worry about your performances compared to other pokemon's. There are many reasons why you might not do as well

as you would like, and all of them are valid. You should worry about getting better for yourself, not about getting better than others."

I turned around, pouting. That was almost exactly what Ilma had said, and I was upset to know that she would be disappointed to hear that I had not actually listened to her. Annoyed, I turned my back to Topa and went back to venting my rage on the poor walls.

When Agnes came back to the manor after morning classes were over, my anger vanished, quickly replaced with a form of angst I couldn't identify. As she came to check up on me, I was still venting my rage in colourful bursts on the mattresses of the pokemon practice room. She silently walked up behind me and sat by my side, waiting for me to turn to her. Topa left the room, realising that this would be a private moment between Agnes and I, and knowing she was not needed if humans were around.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, gently petting the top of my head while carefully avoiding my wounded ear.

I didn't reply and hopped on her crossed legs as I could, lifting my injured paw to avoid putting any strain on it. She gave me time to sit before she continued stroking the back of my head, and we remained completely silent for a few minutes in this position. I could feel my anger vanish, calmed down by simply cuddling with Agnes, but at the same time, a feeling of intense worry built up, that had been inhibited by my resentment.

"You know," Agnes said, hesitating. "I don't believe you've done anything wrong. This Fenrir attacked you, it's not your fault. Don't let anyone make you think otherwise. But..."

I stared at her and was surprised to notice she looked very resolute, as if she were going to say something difficult.

"I don't think you should resent Fenrir or his trainer," she continued. "That's not going to change anything, and it will just make the matter worse. I know it's hard, I'm beyond pissed at that houndour for doing

this to you, but what does that achieve? It just leads to more trouble. I'm not asking you to forgive him - I'm just telling you you shouldn't try to get revenge. Okay?"

I nodded. I wasn't idiotic enough to try to get revenge on a pokemon that was that much stronger than me, but I did feel extremely angry at the houndour. His sister's death was not my doing, and it was unfair that I be punished for it.

"Remember that Ilma wants to see you," Agnes added, gently tapping my hindquarters to tell me to get off of her lap. "I'll take you to the doctor's office before class, and you'll stay there until classes are over. Listen to what she says, but remember: she's your superior and you should stay polite at all times. I can see that you're angry, but don't let that get the best of you."

She stood up, dusting her pants.

"When you're better, we will need to train harder than before. I'm not going to let anyone think that you're weaker than them because you're younger. Think you can handle that?"

I had no idea what "that" referred to and I was not truthfully sure I could handle anything, but I yelped with confidence anyway. Now wasn't the time to let Agnes down or let her know that the recent events had affected me. I already had plans on practising with Topa, and Agnes' ideas could only be beneficial, but I was a bit weary of how exhausting it would be.

When she left the room to go eat, I asked Topa to carry me upstairs so I could lay on my pillow, waiting for the dreaded time when I would have to go back to school and face Ilma. I had no idea what she wanted to talk about and could only assume it would be related to the houndour's attack.

"You look so calm," Topa noticed.

"Huh?"

"You smell angry," she explained. "Extremely angry, but you are acting so calm and level-headed. I am surprised."

"Painkillers are making me a bit groggy," I replied as an excuse. "And... Agnes being so calm really helps me."

"I see," Topa whispered, probably more for herself than for me. "I am glad you can control yourself so well. When you said you were attacked, I thought it would be a hard hit on you. You were just starting to feel more lively and I was afraid you would slip back into depression."

"If anything, it makes me angry, but... I know I shouldn't let it get to me, so I'm trying to move on."

"I am glad," Topa repeated. "That is very mature of you."

"I'm not a kid."

No words were exchanged beyond that, and I could enjoy a moment of silence to try and sort out my thoughts, the ninetales opting to leave me alone to rest rather than stay by my side and potentially disturb me. Unfortunately, Agnes interrupted me quickly, saying that it was time to go back.

As promised, Agnes stopped by the doctor's office before going to class. The vapoleon was not with her human, and he decided it would be a great opportunity to check up on how my wounds were healing. To my relief, the ear was repairing well and there was no sign of infection on my wounded paw, which meant that I would be getting better rapidly. While waiting for his pokemon, the doctor made me do a few exercises to maintain my injured wrist. Although some were fairly painful, I clenched my teeth and waited patiently.

When the vapoleon finally came in, the doctor left the office, leaving us two to talk, saying he didn't want to be a disturbance. After a few awkward seconds during which I did not dare look at my instructor, she asked:

"How are you feeling?"

I worked up the courage to look her in the eyes as she sat by my side on the medical bed I was stuck on. I had never been this close to her, and I was only noticing how damaged her entire left flank was. Her fur was too short to cover the dozens of serrated scars that dotted almost the entire left side of her body. Apart from her damaged ear, her head was mostly without scars, except for her left eye which had a slightly lighter colour than the deep black of her right eye.

"I don't know," I sighed with honesty. "How am I supposed to feel?"

Ilma seemed to be surprised by the question, but kept her composure and answered quickly:

"Hurt. Irritated. Upset. I would expect you to be at least one of those three."

"I am hurt," I replied, waving my paw at her.

"Not physically injured. Emotionally hurt."

"I don't know," I shrugged. "I've been attacked. It's the third time this has happened, I'm getting used to it."

Ilma had a very odd eye movement that I would interpret as raising an eyebrow. She was definitely not convinced by my answer.

"Run me down through everything that happened yesterday."

I sighed, meaning to show my displeasure, but Ilma ignored it.

"I was in the gym, in a corner, waiting for the end of classes. I saw there was a houndour that was staring at me but it didn't really bother me, I'm pretty sure most pokemon have already been staring at me because I'm a vulpix."

It felt like my throat collapsed on itself when I said that.

"Probably, yes," Ilma confirmed, probably to encourage me to continue.

"Pico left me for a few minutes, I don't know why, I didn't ask. Then that houndour came to me and started asking me questions. The conversation quickly came to my belly wound and my... aggression. Then it switched to the houndour that died in the pokemon centre. She was his sister and he's unhappy that I survived. I asked him to let me go but he wouldn't. I tried to run away but he attacked me, we fought and Pico saved me."

"I see. So you've done nothing to him."

That was no longer a question, but a mere observation, but it made my blood boil. Unable to contain myself, I lashed out at the vaporeon:

"Yeah, I did nothing. You thought I was responsible? I woke up in the pokemon centre fucking dead and this idiot tries to kill me because I survived and his sister didn't. I've never done anything. I never asked for any of this shit. Why is everyone ganging up against me?"

I was fulminating. Ilma, unhappy with my rude language, simply stared me down, and my anger quickly turned into fear. I ducked in a very submissive stance, scared out of my gut by the vaporeon's amazing power.

"Watch your tongue," she ordered strictly. "I would smack your anger out of you if you were not injured right now. Don't do this again."

"I'm sorry," I whined. "It won't happen again."

"Good!" she replied with a smile, abandoning her overwhelming shadow.

Her smile was only ephemeral, and she became serious again.

"I know you're not responsible for anything that happened to you. But... You would be lying if you said it didn't affect you."

"Of course it affected me," I replied. "I died once, came close to dying again a few days later, and now someone tries to kill me. All because... I survived something. I don't understand why everyone hates me for it."

"Not everyone does. In fact, I would argue no one does. The houndour and his sister's trainer's reactions are just like your reaction to my implying you might have been even partially responsible for the attack. It's a purely emotional reaction. So, let me ask again: how are you feeling?"

I took some time to think about a proper answer.

"I don't understand," I said. "Why is all this happening? I am so... lost. Before I can come to terms with something that happened, something else happens and adds to it. I'm completely out of control, I can't do anything. I've been saved from death three times. And I was powerless. I feel so weak and useless. I'm just... nothing."

"I would argue that you are not weak, but I see where you're coming from. And I can understand why, I've been there too. I can tell you that you will need to work hard to overcome that feeling, and it's going to take time. The police training program is meant to make you stronger physically and in skills, but it's very tough and requires a lot of tenacity."

"Do you think I can do it?"

"Certainly," she replied with confidence. "I haven't seen much of you, but your attitude in the pool proved that you have guts and the will to do what's asked of you and more. The fact you fought an adult houndour and came out of it with only minor injuries tells me a lot about your potential."

"What would you know about that? You haven't seen the fight. The houndour is just an idiot, he could have killed me three times over."

"He could have, but he didn't, because you didn't let him. You successfully stopped him three times from killing you. How does that not boost your confidence?"

"It was luck."

"You did something and it worked. Three times in what... two minutes? Against an adult foe who has probably spent more time training for fighting than you've spent alive."

"I panicked. I didn't plan any of it."

"That is what makes it so good." Ilma insisted. "That is where skill is determined. In a fight, a battle, or a war, you have no time to plan or follow your plan. Shit happens, you have to react to it, and if you try to stick to your plan you are dead meat. Your plans won't save. Your guts and your instincts will, and yours seem to be strong."

"They aren't," I insisted as well.

"Describe the fight to me."

I did, as accurately as I could remember. It was still vivid in my memory, although I thought back to it with more brain and less guts.

"That was good," Ilma commented, genuinely impressed. "I would never have thought of tripping him that way. How did you come up with that?"

"I just needed him off of me so I could run. I knew I didn't have the strength to push him away with my hind legs, so I had to find an alternative. He was only standing on his hind legs so that was a weak spot. Even then, it didn't do anything. He caught up to me easily."

"You've made that analysis, which by the way is very accurate and surprisingly sharp, while fighting the houndour, trying to keep him off of your throat, and in a state of panic. Do you understand what I'm saying? That is amazing, especially for a pokemon with little experience. You're cunning, quick-thinking, and remarkably intelligent. And you're so young! I am telling you, you are very skilled. I don't understand why you are so worried about being weak. You've been pretty spectacular so far."

I wasn't sure if she was being genuine, or if she was trying to make me feel better, but I felt like I didn't deserve the compliments. I knew I was weak, and I would just disappoint her if she truly placed that much hope in me.

"Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

"Mostly, yes. I wanted to make sure you were coping with the attack. Don't let it get you down or ruin your confidence."

"What are others going to say?"

"Who cares? If anything, they learnt they should not mess with you. Your flareon friend would protect you anyway. Focus on your training and don't worry about others. Have you not learnt anything from the swimming sessions?"

I looked away in shame, aware that she knew I had indeed not learnt my lesson after I nearly drowned.

"How is your belly holding up?"

"I'm fine," I replied, being honest. "It's pretty much healed now. I just have... this ugly massive scar. And now I have two more."

"You should be proud of your scars," Ilma advised with a proud smile. "They're your story. Witnesses to the battles you've fought and won."

"I can't be proud of this one," I sighed, referring to my stomach wound.

To my surprise, the vaporeon lost her smile and became very grave, looking away with an unmistakably sad look on her face.

"I know how you're feeling, believe me."

"What happened... if I may ask?"

She looked at me, and I discovered a whole new part of her in her eyes. It felt like she had lost all the power she had been emanating this whole time, and she became more like a normal person, secretly tortured but not showing it, and she was now displaying the full extent of her vulnerability. The idea that she had problems of her own had never crossed my mind. She felt so strong, fearless, and generally in control, that I never considered that there could be anything she did not have control over, and I was struck by how wrong I was.

"I don't assume you do, considering you were wild, but do you know the geopolitical situation of this country?"

I shook my head. Although I was looking forward to knowing more about it, and about the world I was now living in, I felt guilty for bringing up the subject in this context and considered backing off, but Ilma had already started talking and I did not dare interrupt her.

"There are several continents on this planet. They're... huge patches of land separated by oceans. There are three of them: the biggest one is at the very north, it covers the majority of the north hemisphere on its own. The two others are a bit smaller - one that covers a bit of the equator and goes south, the smallest, and ours, about halfway into the south hemisphere. Of course, it's divided into numerous countries. We're at the very left of it. This country's called Mensa, and it currently is the biggest in the world in terms of surface by quite far. Now... There's an island north of it called Idyllis. It's shaped kind of like a goblet, and it's insanely rich. It's always been

under our control, but there's a country called Ruize not too far from this one that had been eyeing it for quite a while. About thirty years ago, after an election, the country's president became aggressive and started invading his neighbours. We took no part in those wars until Ruize launched an attack to seize control of Idyllis and its resources."

She took a break to make sure I had understood everything. It was a bit too much information at once, but I saw clearly where this was going.

"Where are we with regards to the country?" I asked.

"South... Kind of. A bit to the west of the middle line of the country, too."

"How come this country is so much bigger than the others?"

"Across history, it has always been very powerful and other kingdoms did not dare challenge it. The emperors here were quite greedy and annexed vast areas, and it all evolved into the country we have today. Other kings were a bit wiser and most importantly a lot less rich, so they couldn't afford to go to war with others to expand their territory."

"I see. It's just a matter of power, heh?"

"Sort of. It's always said that the area this country covers nowadays is the origin of pokemon. There are three extremely famous mountains here that attract a lot of attention. They're not particularly tall, but they're remarkable in other ways. Some say they're cursed, and they've always been an important part of this country's history. There's the White Hat, which you probably know, very close to this town. It's the tallest of the three. Northwest of here, nearly at the extreme west of the country, there's a mountain called the Gold Hat. It's the shortest one and looks like a tall hill. All the vegetation there takes on a permanently yellow colour. And east of here, about midway between the White Hat and the Gold Hat in terms of latitude,

there's the Red Hat, which is a volcano. Naturally, access to all three is strictly forbidden."

I managed to contain my smile, noticing how reminiscent this was of the three islands featured in the second pokemon movies. Hearing about those three mountains also made me excited, for the similarity between them and the movie also increased the chances that my theory about Articuno was correct. I couldn't wait to tell Topa and above all to find a way to get to the White Hat.

"These form a weird triangle, and right in its centre, you can find the capital of the country."

"What is it called?"

"Mew."

My heart skipped a beat as I was unable to contain my smile anymore. I probably couldn't get any more excited about it all. Unfortunately, Ilma ruined my excitement by going back to more serious matters.

"Ruize attacked Idyllis by surprise. The response from our government was swift and merciless. Unfortunately, we couldn't just march onto the country without having our military go through neutral ones and we had to stick to fighting on our ground. Doctor Belish and I were soldiers back then, and we got drafted. We were part of the medical staff and it wasn't pretty."

"You were already a soldier?"

"A rather experienced one, even. Both of us were. We had been in the military for over ten years."

"What? How old are you?"

Ilma smiled.

"That's not a question you should ask a superior! I don't mind, though. I'm 67 now. Doctor Belish is 54."

"You're 67?"

I was baffled. I would never have guessed that she was so old. Did vapoleon, or the eevee evolution tree in general, have outrageously long lives like Ninetales?

"Are you surprised?" she asked, genuinely curious.

"Yeah. I thought you were really young."

"I am," she confirmed. "Vapoleon can live quite long lives. I'll probably outlive my human's children's children. I won't live anywhere as long as you would if you evolved, though."

"How long?"

"Few hundred years. Three to four."

I had trouble wrapping my mind around a life that long. Why were there not way too many vapoleon or ninetales around, with lives this stupidly extended?

"I have so many more questions," I complained. "But... I interrupted you. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. You're curious, I can understand that. Do you want me to continue my story?"

"Yes, please."

I was genuinely curious to know what happened to her. I could already somewhat guess, but I didn't know the details, and I didn't want to make any assumptions.

"We got drafted after there was a clear front line. We were sent to the island to act as medics during the battles. We've been in... more

battles than I care to remember, and it was pretty horrible, but that's the nature of war. It's difficult to survive a gunshot, whether you're a human or a pokemon."

"Wait," I interrupted again. "Pokemon participate in wars too?"

"Of course. We all fight. Humans have guns, we have our powers. It gets messy and ugly quite fast. Of course, pokemon are always a priority target. There are specialized units to snipe and kill pokemon before they can use their powers. On the other hand, there also are technologies to protect us. Pokemon are generally the main casualties, too. Humans shoot them and we use our powers to kill one another. And if one side loses all its pokemon, it's pretty much over for them."

"That's..."

"It's war," Ilma sighed. "I don't understand what the point of it is, but it's our job as soldiers. We kill the enemy until they give up."

"So, your wounds..."

"Near the end of the war, we participated in a global offensive against enemy positions. They had a very strong fort that we were to attack, and we had been very well prepared for it. We had a whole squad of psychic types to deflect bullets, fire types in the back to clean the machine gun nests and the infantry in general, a few poison types to cover us with fog and so on. Naturally, our enemy also had their own squad of pokemon, and the job for us water types was to target and neutralize the enemy fire types. Also, as medics, we had to tend to the wounded and evacuate them when possible. We were to get in close combat as soon as possible and use the fire and thunder types to wipe out the enemy."

She paused, her wavering eyes focused on a distant object that neither of us could see.

"You see, in a pokemon battle, everything is balanced. It's well done, all types stand a chance against other types. But in a real battle... fire and thunder win, period. Their ability to kill is so much superior than other types that they're the main resource in an army. Of course, every type has its strengths, but in a head-on battle like that, they're just too strong. Us water types are pretty much useless, alas."

"When the assault was started, everything went well. Our psychic types offered great protection against stray bullets, the poison types did their job as disruptors, and we could advance with little resistance. Unfortunately, all hell broke loose when we came in range of their artillery. Our commandos sent to destroy it had failed and they started decimating us. I'll spare you the details, but the first wave was pushed back and we had to retreat. When the retreat order was given, our formation was broken and we no longer had any protection."

She sighed.

"Our squad got hit by mortar fire. Head on, right in the middle of everyone. Our psychic type got torn to pieces. The shell exploded almost directly next to me and I tanked all the shrapnel. I was blown several metres away, knocking other people down on my way. Belish and a few others came to me to carry me back to safety. I was rushed to the military hospital and taken care of. They had to burn the entire left side of my body to stop the bleeding before removing all the shrapnel pieces one by one and cauterising every wound several hours a day. It took me almost a year of regular surgeries and exams to make sure my internal organs were doing fine to recover from it. The war was over before I could return to the front, and Belish and I were decorated. By taking in all the shrapnel, I had saved the life of most of the soldiers in my squad, including Belish's. After the war, we were offered a position here, and that's how I came to teach swimming to police recruits. I lost part of my fin and my left eye is almost completely blind."

I was speechless. I didn't know if I should try to say something to make her feel better, or just let her finish her story. I couldn't even imagine the pain she had gone through. I started feeling guilty of complaining so much about my own wounds when I had actually gone through so little compared to her.

She turned to me with a very resolute face. She didn't seem to be sad anymore, but she was still very serious.

"I know how you feel when you say you've avoided death. I've been there. I know what it feels like to watch someone die. And I know how difficult it is to get up after that. But you've got to try and make that effort. Don't listen to others saying you should keep going to honour the memory of those who died. Live for yourself. No one's going to live for you."

Chapter 23

After an awkward moment during which I pondered which reaction would be best, only to decide to remain speechless, we started chatting about the school in general and how I was feeling about it so far. In spite of the gruesome story she had just told me, Ilma was back to her normally joyful self. Unfortunately, the small talk was brutally interrupted by Ilma's trainer, who barged into his office, clearly in a hurry. He was wearing a police uniform, which I had never seen him with, and had come in to grab a lab coat he hastily equipped.

"We're going," he simply ordered his pokemon.

The vapoleon looked at me, puzzled, before barking at her trainer, standing next to me.

"Ruby's coming. Agnes is waiting in the car. Hurry."

After seeing me limping my way to the ground, he realised that he forgot I was wounded, and came to me to pick me up, then stormed off into the parking lot. A police car was waiting for him, Agnes standing nervously by it. She rejoiced when she saw me in an apparently good mood, and took the time to hug me before being forced into the vehicle by the driver. Ilma sat with us at the back while doctor Belish took place on the second front seat, and the car roared out of the police school, siren wailing.

"What's going on?" I asked Ilma.

"I don't know," she replied, surprisingly calm, as if this was just another Wednesday for her. "Wait a bit and we'll learn more."

"Did something happen?"

"Yes. We're being driven to a crime scene."

"Why were Agnes and I taken along then? We aren't police."

"I think you can guess why on your own."

My guts clenched painfully as the scar on my belly seemingly bloated to remind me of its presence. The doctor was on his phone, saying something about arriving soon.

Agnes, while worried, had a very calm face and was patiently sitting by the car's door next to me. She too was wearing her uniform, but had no badge. When Belish finished his call, he turned to us.

"Sorry for taking you out of your classes, Agnes," he said. "Another dead pokemon was found, and it suffered the same wound as Ruby. We're going there to examine the area before journalists and other nuisances come in."

"Why was I taken along?" Agnes asked in a surprisingly neutral tone.

"Ruby is a victim, and you are a witness, on top of being an apprentice police officer. You two might be of use."

"If the body was recently discovered, how did you get authorization to bring us in?"

The doctor smiled.

"I didn't. Stick with me and don't stray away. This is true especially for you, Ruby."

I nodded in his direction, showing I was not going to disobey.

"It was the director's idea," he added with a mysterious smile. "I know forensics and crime investigation isn't the speciality you want to take, but having you with us might prove fruitful."

I looked at Ilma, worried, but she didn't seem to share any of my anxiety. She gave me instructions on what to do and what not to do while at the crime scene, which could simply be summed up with

"don't touch anything", and successfully calmed me down, saying there wouldn't be any fighting and we were just going to have a look around and look for clues.

Once the car stopped, we were allowed out of it by the doctor himself, who then walked quickly to the crime scene. It was, just like what I had seen in the movies, surrounded by several armed policemen making sure no one undesired was stepping in. They had deployed numerous weird poles to which they had tied "crime scene, do not cross" ribbons to prevent entry. There were too many policemen around to count, most of which were followed by their pokémon. All of them were evolved and wore a collar with a shiny police badge attached to it. They were too busy setting a perimeter or doing other things I wouldn't be able to guess to pay attention to the new group of people coming in. Only the man standing in front of us to check for IDs noticed us.

"Sir Belish," he said, standing in a respectful salute.

"Hey," the doctor replied casually. "This is Agnes Trokair. She's a student and has been invited by the director to join us in the investigation. The vulpix is her partner."

The man looked at us in disbelief, but didn't seem to be eager to challenge the doctor in any way and simply let us pass, staring at me as I walked by him. I simply followed everyone, scouting around me, impressed by the number of people there were and the pokémon I could see. Overall, they were all evolved forms of the ones I had already seen at school, although as expected, there were no ninetales, flareon, or any of the eevee line. None of them paid any attention to us and we walked straight into the director.

"Hey Agnes, Belish," the latter said upon seeing us.

His absol was not with him, but he had on his shoulder a beautiful bird, with feathers of fire and ash. His belly was grey with red spots, not unlike burning cinder, while the top of his body was red and the end of his wings were black. The bird was taller than Ilma herself

and about twice as tall as I was, and although he looked fiercely impressive, his power felt puny compared to the aura Ilma was herself emanating. Without realising it, I took a few steps closer to her, to the point where I could bite her tail without extending my neck. When we stopped walking, the talonflame chirped at the vaporeon before the director sent him away.

"Sir," Agnes saluted.

"I assume you know why you were brought here?" the director asked directly.

"Yes, sir."

"Good, that saves me some talking. I'll leave you to Belish, I have things to attend to..."

The talonflame came back, shouted at his trainer while nodding, and flew back to where he came from.

"... and journalists to fend off," the director added with a smile. "How are they so fast? Oh well."

He then ran to follow his pokemon.

"Follow me," the doctor ordered. "The body is by the forest."

Only then did I realise how many trees I could see not far off. They were perfectly normal trees, although I wouldn't have been able to identify their species, but something felt odd about it. The tree line was eerily clean, and the separation between the forest and the outside of it was brutal. The trees were surprisingly dense for the border of a forest, and it felt like light simply refused to step into it. Upon seeing the vegetation, the bloating feeling of my scar became worse, and I started feeling extremely uncomfortable.

"Ilma?" the doctor said as we approached the body.

The vaporeon nodded, then stopped me from walking any further by putting her tail before me, blocking the way.

"Wait here," she said.

"I can't go see it?" I asked, slightly hurt. "Why bring me in then?"

"I don't know if it's a good idea for you to see this. Do you know what's under that shroud?"

"It's a pokemon that was killed by whoever attacked me, right?"

"Correct. Do you still want to see that? You won't see the aftermath of the wound. You won't see it partially healed or covered in a bandage. You're going to see what happened to you in its worst state."

I froze for a second, remembering my own wound, realising I was scared of imagining what it would look like before being healed, but I shook the feeling off. I was drawn to it by an unexplained morbid curiosity. I felt like I needed to see it, at least once, now that I was here.

I turned to Ilma and nodded.

"Sit here and listen to the humans," she ordered. "I'll bring you with me when it's my turn."

Her turn for what? Inspecting the body? Reluctant, I sat as told to and waited.

"It's the same," I heard Agnes say, her voice muffled by the hand covering her mouth and nose. "Same wound, same blood traces. The pokemon was injured inside the forest, then tried to crawl away, and..."

She didn't finish her sentence. The doctor added a few things that I didn't listen to - my eyes were being drawn to the forest. I was

fascinated by the mystical feeling it gave, although it was more creepy than beautiful. Ilma noticed and explained:

"This is the Gloss Forest. I can see understand you're drawn to it. There are lots of stories surrounding it, and with all these attacks happening, it might just have received a new one."

"That's... the Gloss Forest?"

She nodded. I remembered my conversation with Topa about the White Hat and that forest, but while I was still very excited to go to the White Hat and find out whether or not Articuno actually lived there, I was absolutely certain I did not want to visit the forest anymore.

"I don't like it," I said.

"I can understand," she repeated. "I wouldn't like to go back to Idyllis either."

At that moment, the doctor called Ilma, and she dragged me with her. I was reluctant to get any closer to the edge of the forest, but I was curious to see the body.

"Are you sure you want to see this?" Ilma asked me again.

I nodded, resolute. Ilma looked at her trainer and nodded too, and he lifted the shroud covering the corpse.

I would not describe what I saw, but it instantly made me nauseous to the point of gagging. The feeling in my belly became so intense that I turned my head away from that hellish display and attempted to scratch the scar on the floor, as if that would make it go away, my entire body squirming in imaginary pain.

"Are you alright?" Agnes and Ilma asked at the same time.

I took a few seconds to gather my spirits and ignore the fact that the gaping wound I had just witnessed was decorating my own belly but a

few weeks before, and walked one step closer to the body, enough to give it a few sniffs.

I was taken aback by the nothingness. The body has no smell whatsoever. Not even the smell of the growl it belonged to - it was completely devoid of any scents, as if the black hole of a wound was sucking in all odours as well. Puzzled, I turned to Ilma.

"Can you smell that?" I asked.

"It has no smell, right?" she confirmed. "I can. All the bodies were the same. Absolutely no odour. The humans don't seem to be aware of it. I was hoping that you'd be able to smell something, since your sense of smell is one of the best in the entire pokemon kingdom..."

She sounded disappointed and puzzled at the same time.

"Can you smell something?" the doctor asked.

I replied no, although I wasn't certain he realised that I meant it literally. He was probably assuming that I just didn't recognize any scents, which would have been helpful.

Belish sighed and turned to the forest.

"I think it's time we closed this off," he said. "Most of the bodies were found next to this forest. The mayor doesn't want us to because it's a popular tourist attraction, but ten pokemon have been murdered here. Well... nine."

The director came back to question Belish about his findings.

"Same as usual, sir," the doctor replied. "This also matches what Agnes saw. There is no doubt: this is the same killer."

The director sighed.

"We need to close the forest," Belish said.

"Agreed. I'll talk to the mayor this evening. Journalists are here, I suggest you stay with us if you don't want to bring attention to yourself."

That last sentence was directed at Agnes. She had become sadly famous for being my owner after the news of my survival was made public, and there were no doubts the pests would try to pester her if they noticed she was around.

Belish and Ilma then walked around the body, carefully examining it and what was around it hoping to find something new. They took a few samples from the wound and the blood trail the pokemon had left when trying to crawl to safety. Agnes and I had been instructed to assist and point out anything we could notice, but neither of us said anything. I spent time sniffing around on Ilma's suggestion, but apart from the body, everything had normal scent. Even the blood traces smelt like the growlithe, and there was no specific odour I couldn't guess the origin of. When I shared my conclusions with her, the vaporeon sighed:

"How can someone kill ten grown pokemon and not leave a single trace?"

"They did leave a trace," I replied.

"Oh? Did you see something?" Ilma asked, interested.

"No," I explain, feeling ashamed of being unable to help. "But... They leave no trace, not even their odour. That's something unusual."

"Oh, that," she whispered, disappointed.

Her ears stood up shortly after and she turned to me smiling.

"Aren't you clever!" she commented. "Considering that leaving no traces is a trace is unexpected!"

"Did you not think of it already?"

"I have, but I did not expect that from a first year student. You will be taught in class that anything unusual is good information, I just didn't think you would figure it out on your own. Especially not given you were wild just a few months ago!"

Although she was enthusiastic, I felt guilty, as if I had done something wrong. After that, I didn't say a word, pretending to follow and try to help while Belish and Ilma were working, but my attention was focused on the forest. I was hoping to see one of the lights Topa mentioned, thinking that I could identify them, but I couldn't see anything. Staring at the forest only made me increasingly uncomfortable. I felt a strange feeling of anxiety and fear fester in my gut, and it grew so overwhelming that I ended up tugging on Agnes' trousers to ask her to get away from this place.

She noticed that I was scared and picked me up, trying to reassure me, as we all walked away from the body. Belish gave the evidence he collected to one of the policemen and we went back to the car. Although there were quite a few journalists outside of the perimeter, mostly taking pictures, we managed to avoid them and reach the car undisturbed.

"How are you feeling?" Belish asked Agnes.

"Sad, I suppose," she admitted.

"I was afraid seeing the body would..."

He wasn't quite sure how to finish the sentence, but Agnes shrugged.

"It's not the first time I've seen that," she said while petting me. "I hope some of the samples we took will help."

"If it's similar to all other times, they won't," the doctor sighed.

"Are you going to close off the forest now?" Agnes asked.

"Probably, yes. I don't know what, but it's related to these murders. All the victims have been found in the forest or by the edge. Ruby's reaction to staying there so long also tends to show that something is happening in there."

"I found her by the forest too," Agnes remembered, "but it was late at night. I couldn't see anything but her. I wonder if she remembers it."

I didn't, and I wasn't certain I wanted to. The idea of having been attacked and killed was enough for me - I didn't want to know the details.

"Thanks for your help," Belish said while Agnes and I took place in the car that brought us in. "I have more work to do, so go back to the school for now. Don't bother going to class, they'll be over soon anyway. Get your car and go home."

"Thank you for taking me with you," Agnes replied.

I looked at Ilma, wondering how she was going to tell her trainer about the absence of smell. She smiled at me, and her smiling face, albeit damaged, made me feel a lot better, as if I were sharing something with her I was not sharing with anybody else.

Back at the mansion, Topa pressed me with questions about what Ilma wanted to talk about. I only mentioned her questions about the attack and didn't talk about her personal story. I also told her about the new victim and what we did while at the crime scene, sharing Ilma's opinion and our discoveries. She seemed to be interested mostly in the forest and completely ignored the odourless body.

"So the attacks happen in the Gloss Forest?"

"Yeah," I confirmed. "I'm not sure I want to go there anymore."

"You did not know that you had been attacked there?"

"I don't remember anything before I woke up... dead. It wasn't my life."

Topa seemed to be puzzled, but also disappointed.

"You wanted to visit the forest, right?" I asked.

"Yes," she admitted. "After what you said about wisps and spirits, I was curious to go there and see for myself what those lights are. As I explained before, they could easily be explained if a pokemon is responsible for them. Remember Will-O-Wisp? However... I feel like I would like to be wrong. I hope the explanation is less simple than that."

I was surprised by her tone as she said that. She felt... sad. Not the kind of sadness I had seen in her before, where she was worried about my well-being. It was something different.

"I don't know if I do," I replied. "But... I'd like to get to the bottom of this. I want to know what those lights are."

"So do I!" she smiled, recovering her enthusiasm. "With the police closing access to the forest, it might be difficult."

I remained silent.

"How are you feeling?" Topa asked all of a sudden.

"Huh?"

"Regarding the... the new victim. You saw the wound, did you not?"

"Yeah. It was... disgusting. I can't picture myself having the same injury. Honestly... it didn't really affect me. It feels too surreal."

"I see."

She took a break, thinking.

"I still want to go in the forest," she insisted. "The attacks always happened when the pokemon were alone, right? We will be fine if we are together, especially if Agnes is with us."

"I'd rather see the mountain", I complained.

I didn't like the idea of going back there, remembering the odd feeling I had and how scared I was just seeing the trees. Whoever had attacked me was in there and I was certainly not going to give them a second attempt.

"We can see both!"

I found it weird how much Topa was insisting. It was the first time she had made it clear she wanted something. Although she felt very enthusiastic and cheerful, there was something sad in her eyes, as if that forest reminded her of sad memories. I on the other hand was not happy about it and decided to change the subject:

"Can we go practice more?"

"That would be a bad idea. You are still injured."

"I'm fine," I lied.

As proof of that, I put my paw on the floor, clenching my teeth as stealthily as I could. Surprisingly enough, there was no pain, and I could walk correctly despite the bandage being a bit of a bother.

"Alright," she conceded, obviously happy at the idea of playing with me. "Be careful not to overexercise."

"We can take more breaks," I suggested. "I just want to do something, I feel like punching a wall."

"Are you angry?" she asked, surprised.

"No, I'm just... tired of doing nothing, and I have a lot of energy. Also, the tournament starts next week, and I need to get in shape for it."

"The tournament is about brawling, is it not?"

"Yeah."

"Then we should wrestle!"

She was a lot more enthusiastic now that the Gloss Forest topic had been dropped. I promised myself to question her about it later on, but I didn't feel like doing it yet. I wanted to forget that dreadful forest and the attacks. Playing with Topa would hopefully help.

I was hit by unexpected embarrassment when we were in the practice room. Topa had insisted in carrying me down the stairs, and I suspected she secretly enjoyed it, but while dangling from her muzzle, I had been trying to imagine myself playing fighting with her, and remembering how my cats did it, I realised that I would not be able to do the same. To this day still, I did not feel like I was a vulpix, although my body was no longer human, and I did not feel like I could behave normally. I had no idea what the point of playing fighting was, or what I had to do, and I was genuinely scared of Topa's size compared to mine. As a human, I played fighting with my cats who were about as big as my hand, and it mostly consisted in me waving my hand around, sometimes rubbing my cat's belly to annoy it, waiting for the animal to jump on me, pretend to bite and scratch me before the game reset. It was a lot of fun for me mostly because I got to spend time with my cat, whom I loved, and I felt like I was making it happy by giving it attention and playing with it, but now that I was the pet, I couldn't picture myself playing the same way. I didn't want or need attention the way my pets did, and I certainly did not have the urge to play with my owner's hand. My idea of playing included outdoor sports, video games, board games and other social activities, not... this.

"I can't do this," I admitted after Topa put me down.

"Is something the matter?" she asked, trying to hide her disappointment.

"I can't do it," I repeated. "I'm not an animal, I can't play like this. I don't know what the point is. I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Well, this is a game," Topa replied. "Think of it as a sport? We pretend to be fighting until one of us admits defeat, then we take a short break and start again. It is a lot more fun than you would think! Did you not play fighting with your siblings?"

"Huh... no. Boys sometimes do, using sticks and pretending they're weapons, or with weapon replicas, but... girls don't do that."

"Why?"

I remained silent for a few seconds, unable to understand Topa's question.

"Pardon?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"That is weird. Why would females not play fighting? What were you doing when you were younger?"

"Well, it's... girls don't do that. Boys play with the weapons and soldiers and girls play with..."

I stopped, suddenly realizing why this sounded weird to the ninetales. For her, there were no such things as social norms or expectations. The only differences between males and females were the genitals, a few details in how their body was built, and other things related to mating and taking care of kids. Everything else I knew as a human and based my identity as a girl on were social constructs, from the clothes I wore to make-up, hair, toys, and gender roles. For pokemon and animals in general, being male or female had no impact on their early life at all, and only started being relevant when they reached puberty and became of age to reproduce. Male and female kits were treated the same way, and they played the same games.

"Nevermind," I whispered, suddenly grim and having lost any energy I had.

I felt like I could understand Topa's frustration a bit more when she was unable to help me. My life and concerns as a human probably felt completely alien to her, and there was no way she could ever understand any of them. I felt enlightened as her rant about humans creating problems for themselves over a month before finally made sense for me. I started questioning my own problems, wondering which of them were actual issues. What did it mean for me to be human, as opposed to being a vulpix? What was essential to it that this body prevented me from achieving? Was I only upset about losing my position at the top of the food chain, and taking the place of the pet in the master-pet relationship? Was I simply angry at losing the control over my life, and more importantly over the life of others, as I became an animal myself and my own life was now under control of my owner?

"Are you overthinking again?" Topa asked, slightly worried.

"I... No. I'm wondering... I only realised how much of my life as a human was controlled... no, defined by social norms. You asked me why girls don't play fighting, and when they want to play with superhero toys, or with weapons, their parents tend not to let them. Well, I honestly don't know. I've never even questioned it. It... it just was. It felt so basic to me, so... so normal. I never considered anything else was possible. I never considered anything else could be considered. But now that you're asking that question... it's all social norms. That's how humans work. The men go to work, provide the family with an income, they go to war to defend their house, and the women stay at home, take care of the children, care for their husband, do the chores... Everything is split. From our birth until our death, we're given roles and even our parents make sure we don't stray too far. Even down to very basic things like clothes, hair, or basic behaviour, there's what boys do and what girls do. There's no in-between, and if a girl or a boy steps out of their gender role, they get reprimanded. But... I'm a vulpix now, and I'm still a girl, but what

does that change? What if I had turned into a male vulpix? There would be absolutely no difference. All the things that happened to me... none of them would have been any different."

Topa was listening carefully. She didn't look worried anymore, but I felt like she was still somewhat anxious.

"I've realised that... the way I defined myself as a human was entirely dependent on how others saw me. And now... now I'm not a human. I'm free to be whatever I want to be. There are no norms to cater to. No roles to follow. I'm... I am more free than when I was human."

I felt hurt when admitting that. I had basically just conceded that Topa was right all along, and I found it difficult for me, as a human, to be outsmarted by a fox. There were no more doubts in my head: Topa was more intelligent than I had ever been, even before turning into a vulpix, and that was a fatal hit to my ego.

"Why am I not happier?" I continued. "If I am more free, and I do not have any of the social problems I had as a human, why am I still feeling miserable? What exactly is it that made being human so treasurable to me?"

There was a moment of silence, during which Topa was thinking. She eventually turned to me with her usual motherly smile.

"Do you want to know what I think?"

"Yeah," I whispered, as if I was surrendering in shame, unwilling to admit that I needed her insight.

"I think you miss those chains you've lost when you lost your human body. You were a female, and your path was already all set for you. While you were free to choose what you wanted to pursue, you knew what you were expected to do, as you said yourself: raise children and care for your husband. It was easy. However, now that you are a vulpix, you no longer have this. Even if you were to have kits, you

would care for them for a few months, maybe a few years, and they would move on to their own life quickly, leaving you back to your choices. In the end, you would still have to choose your path for yourself: there is nothing you have to conform to. Your future job as a police pokemon does not define you."

"I don't understand," I replied.

"Think of it like this," Topa continued after a short hesitation. "If I were to ask you what it means to be a human female, a girl as you said, what would you answer? You would mention clothing, hair, expected gender roles, and refer to how human society expects you to behave. How many of those actually define you? You have built your identity on what others think of you, or expect you to be. Now, as a vulpix, you lost access to this easy answer to the dreaded question 'who are you?'. You cannot describe yourself by your hair, your job, or what the world expects you to be. By becoming a vulpix, you have earned a terrible power: the power to make a choice. You have to decide for yourself who you want to be. You cannot have others define you anymore. You have to build your own identity, and this is a difficulty you have never faced before. That is why you have been feeling so bad."

"What does it mean, then? What does it mean to 'be' someone? What does it mean to have an identity?"

"Your identity is what makes you, you. There are... millions of humans, millions of vulpix, millions of ninetales, yet no two are the same. That is what makes them different: their identity. By transforming into a vulpix, you have lost what you based your human identity on, and you are now looking for who you are. That is what is making you depressed."

"I don't think you're right," I disagreed after a moment of thinking. "I... I never wanted to talk about it before, but I guess now is a good chance to. My... my very first concern when I woke up in this body was that I might eventually turn into a vulpix completely. Mentally

too. And... and lose my human thinking, my memories and my experiences. I didn't want to turn into a vulpix."

"What are your concerns now? Do you still worry about that?"

"Yes? I think... I still don't want to be a vulpix. Or... I don't want not to be a human. I mean... I don't want not to be human anymore. All these memories I have, the mere fact I was human, it's all very important to me, and I don't want to lose it. I've been counting the days to make sure I remember, every morning, that I used to be human. But... I'm fine with being a vulpix, at the same time. I got used to this body, I got used to this life, even if it's not all that great... But at the same time, I don't want to forget I was human. So... why is this so important to me?"

"Being human was part of your identity, and you have lost that when you became a vulpix. You... lost a part of yourself, so to speak. Now, you are still holding on to it because you do not know what to fill the hole with. However... you assume that the rest of you is still the same, and I disagree with that. You do not have any of the things you defined yourself with anymore. Your very behaviour, as you noted yourself, has shifted from human to animal. Yet, you are still trying to keep part of your previous identity. Fact is: you have changed, and so has what you define yourself with. I believe your worry is unwarranted. You will never forget you were human, and you will never forget your human past."

"Why? What makes you so sure of it?"

Topa smiled.

"That is who you are," she replied. "You are a human who turned into a vulpix. That is your identity, and that is something you will never lose."

Chapter 24

Although we didn't practice at all after that, I felt much better the following day. Not only did my paw and ear stop being painful, but Topa's long speech about my identity somehow made me feel better about myself. My new enthusiasm didn't get lost on her, and she sought to take advantage of it:

"Are you willing to try wrestling, now?" she directly asked.

"I... don't know," I admitted. "I still have no idea what I'm supposed to do. And... I'd rather practice battling."

"You will need to know how to wrestle for the tournament you mentioned," she insisted. "I think it would be best to at least try."

Her sudden insistence was very much out of character for her. Although she had been very intent on having me play with her since I was attacked by the houndour and she wasn't hiding it, it was the first time she let me see what she actually wanted and I didn't understand why she seemed to care so much. I still failed to imagine myself playing with her like a kitten played with its mother. Overall, even though my body was young, I was not acting like a kit at all despite Topa's attempts at acting like my mother. Was that the reason why she was insisting so much? Did she want me to act more like a young vulpix?

Even then, why did animals play fighting like they did? Topa and I were more intelligent than the average cat; did that mean our games were different? As a human, the idea I had of "game" had nothing in common with what my pets thought games were. When I played with them, whether it be poking my cats' belly while he was pretending to maul my hand, or throwing balls at my dogs for them to bring them back to me, I was only playing with them because I enjoyed the time I spent in their company. Were those games actually fun for them? Did my dogs enjoy running in circles, giving me a ball that was

instantly thrown back away? Did my cats have fun pretending to attack my hand or were they actually trying to tell me to stop touching them?

Was that the reason why pokemon agreed to battling despite being considered basically gladiators and treated like slaves? Was that their idea of games, or something that was actually so enjoyable that it made it worth all the pain? From what I had experienced with the short battling practice with Topa, I didn't see how I could enjoy battling considering how painful being hit was - and I was hit with a move that was actually not effective, Ember. Topa had said that she herself was not very good at battling. Was it because she didn't enjoy it or simply lacked practice?

In the midst of my ruminations, I peeked at her. We were in the practice room, again, and she was sitting between me and the door, writhing in impatience, staring me down with the hope that her gaze would convince me to play with her, but despite feeling better about myself, I was still not willing to try.

"You are no longer human," Topa insisted when I told her. "I feel like you are still trying to live by the norms forced upon you when you were. You are a vulpix now, and playing fighting, wrestling, and battling are perfectly normal, whether you are female or male."

"I just don't get the concept. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. And... I don't see how it would be fun. When I saw my cats playing together, I could never tell when they were playing or actually fighting. It scared me."

"Well, I can tell you we will be playing. You can retract your claws, if you are scared of being injured."

"I'd rather we practice battling," I admitted, looking away as if I was doing something wrong.

"Why? Battling actually involves a lot of pain. Remember when I fired Ember at you? That was a non-effective move, and it still got you

panting in pain."

"I don't know, something about battling feels... exciting. Fun. But... wrestling doesn't sound fun to me.

"I see," Topa whispered, defeated.

She had clearly run out of arguments. Her beautiful tails were brought down, almost lifeless, and she dragged them along the floor as she carried herself out of the room without a word. I gave a hint of stopping her to ask her to practice with me, but I couldn't get myself to say anything, and I was left alone in the room staring at the door as it closed itself slowly and silently. Shortly after Topa left, the lights went out and I remained motionless where I was, wondering if I had made the right choice.

I lit a small flame in front of my muzzle, keeping my movement minimal so that the lights would not switch themselves back on. The fire I was creating was comfortably warm, but something about the flickering yellow light and how weak it was made me uncomfortable. I kept increasing the size of the flame I held until it lit up the entire room. At that point, my muzzle was slightly open, but I couldn't hold on to that flame for long and eventually stopped maintaining it. When it vanished, the room's light reacted and replaced the faint glow of my power. I could remember when I first tried to breathe fire and how much time I had spent practising, thinking I could never do it - yet, it was so easy for me only a few months later that I could do it without thinking. Repeating the same train of thought, I began relentlessly firing Ember at the walls around me. Was I good enough at Ember for Topa to teach me other moves? Would I finally get to learn Will-O-Wisp?

The ninetales didn't come back and I spent the day alone in the room, entertaining myself as I could, but I ended up laying in the centre of the room, motionless, until the lights turned themselves off again and I was hidden in darkness. I wanted to practice Ember as we did before, firing Ember at each other and trying to dodge, but without a partner, that was impossible. I thought I knew how Topa felt

when I consistently refused to wrestle with her. Was she refusing to practice with me as a petty revenge?

"Ruby?"

That was Agnes' voice coming from the other side of the door.

I raised my head, switching the lights back on, then rushed to join my trainer, pushing the mat-covered door open. Agnes was standing next to it, wearing a simple sports bra and shorts, with a towel put around her neck. She had obviously just been in the human gym, and she had a strong smell of sweat, which was surprisingly not unpleasant to me.

"How are you doing?" she asked, referring to my paw and ear.

I replied joyfully, tapping my wounded paw onto the floor to show that it was not painful anymore.

"That's good!" she smiled. "You'll be coming to school with me tomorrow. I have a surprise for you."

Her smile turned mysterious and I forced myself to smile back, but I didn't quite share her enthusiasm. Although I was aware that the surprise could only be good since it came from Agnes, it made me anxious. My experiences with the unknown had been so far overwhelmingly negative.

By the time dinner came, I still hadn't found the ninetales despite intently looking for her. I didn't dare ask to go outside, as I was unsure whether or not I was allowed to, and it would probably have been refused due to my recent injuries. Assuming she was somewhere in the garden, I carried on with my occupations, trying not to fret more than necessary.

I started being worried when she didn't come home for her meal, and I was left alone to eat. The servant attached to her seemed to have picked up on that as well and informed Agnes, who shrugged it off

saying she was probably sleeping next to the swimming pool again. After the meal, Agnes stayed up watching TV, and I jumped on the couch next to her, lazily receiving petting that I didn't care about. I wanted to warn her that Topa was missing, but she was clearly not worried, making me think that my anxiety was misplaced.

Topa came back when I was already in bed. She smelled of flowers and grass, as expected, and said that she had found a snake she'd been chasing around, hoping that would excuse her absence. She went to her bed and no more words were exchanged. I didn't dare question her more, or talk at all, as she seemed to be exhausted, and tried to my best to fall asleep.

"Wake up, sleepy," Agnes whispered.

It was far too early for me to wake up. Agnes forced me up, explaining that she wanted to change my bandages and take the chance to brush me. She usually didn't bother brushing me herself and left that to Rakuen, who seemed to take great pleasure in running the brush through my fur. More importantly, I was never brushed on a Friday - it was usually a weekly occurrence, after I was washed.

"You're coming to school with me today," she explained. "As I said, I have a surprise for you. We're going to meet someone who will help you."

Help me with what? The only one I knew could help me was Topa, by teaching me to use my powers, and teaching me how to behave like a normal vulpix in general. The person who would help me was at school, which meant that it was probably going to be related to my recent fight. Did she find someone to teach me battling?

Agnes was smiling widely, as if she were looking forward to whatever she had planned for me, but I didn't share her enthusiasm. Whoever I was going to meet, it only meant more social interactions for me and I didn't feel ready for them just yet. I would rather limit them to Ilma and Pico, if possible, until I was more confident about my body

and, more importantly, my abilities. Alas, I was once again not given a choice and I'd have to deal with it as best I could.

At the school, after greeting Pico and Derek as usual, Agnes sent them ahead saying that she was "waiting for someone" and she'd join them shortly. Derek didn't seem to know who she was talking about, which made me anxious. Did he need not to know? Was it important for him to be kept in the dark? Did that mean he did not approve of the person or pokemon I was going to meet?

After a very short wait, Agnes turned around and waved at someone who was coming out of the main building. He was a male student, but his uniform was slightly different from Agnes'. A quick glance at his odour indicated that he was older than she was, which meant his uniform was probably the one worn by seniors.

"Hey Agnes!" he replied when he noticed her.

I stopped following their conversation as I was just noticing the man's pokemon: it was an espeon. He was slightly taller than Pico, but looked a lot less bulky. His entire body was very slender and his legs longer than the flareon's, giving him a very dignified look that reminded me of Topa. His fur, of a pale purple colour, was also a lot shorter, and his tail more akin to a cat's than the pure fluff Pico had. The tail split in two around its middle, and the two tips seemed to move independently. He had massive ears, even compared to a standard eevee's, and under each of them was a long aggregate of fur worn like side bangs. His eyes were the same as Pico's, but a red gem-like crystal decorated the pokemon's forehead.

Although his physique was rather underwhelming, even despite his size, he had the same sort of aura I felt when I met Ilma, albeit less powerful. I felt like he was stronger than Pico, probably due to having more experience, and became unsettled to be surrounded by pokemon that were all that strong.

"Why don't you say hello?" Agnes' friend told his pokemon.

The cat-like creature took a few steps forward before curtsying with surprising dexterity by bending his front legs in a rather submissive manner, which caused Agnes to giggle.

"I keep forgetting about this," she commented, obviously referring to the espeon's polite gesture. "Hello there."

She knelt to pet him, making my blood boil with jealousy.

"So that's the vulpix everyone's been talking about? She looks so young."

I turned my head away, pouting visibly at the mention of my age.

"How is she doing?" he asked.

"She's healing well from her recent wounds, but she's still grumpy. I assume the painkillers are not agreeing with her."

"Is she going to be able to keep up with her training?"

"No problem!" Agnes replied proudly after glancing at me.

I didn't exactly share her confidence, but I was happy that she had such trust in me. Yet, at the same time, it made me sad, because I couldn't shake the feeling that her trust was misplaced.

"So, how do you plan it?"

"She's still on sick leave for now, so as much time as Pride can today. After that... during lunch break, I think. Ruby generally spends her time lounging in the gym with Pico, it would be good to have her do something so she isn't bored."

"Pride is free today," Agnes' friend noticed after a short hesitation. "How do you like that, Pride?"

He turned to his pokemon, who replied he was fine.

"Works for us," the espeon's trainer then agreed.

"Ruby will just wait in the gym. I don't like the idea of sending her off to find Pride on her own."

I couldn't quite disagree with that. So Pride was the espeon... and they were planning something between him and me. Was he going to train me?

"Let's go," Agnes said, hearing the school bell ringing to signal the start of classes. "Have fun, you two. And, Ruby, you can trust Pride. He will help you."

That last line was directed at us two pokemon, and before I could react, Agnes and her friend were already on their way to be swallowed by the sea of students going to their classes, leaving me alone with the espeon.

"Hello!" he said, turning to me before our trainers entered the building. "My name is Pride."

"I'm Ruby," I replied, lacking confidence.

The espeon stood before me in silence, his eyes exploring every inch of my fur and making me extremely uncomfortable.

"You are indeed young. And you have such a pretty name. You were adopted from the wild, right?"

"Yeah?" I replied sharply.

The last time I was asked similar question was by a houndour, and shortly after, I was fighting for my life. Although I didn't get similar vibes from this pokemon, I was still uneasy around him, and caught myself hoping Pico could come rescue me again.

"You must be quite the gem, for Agnes to adopt you directly. Humans adopting wild pokemon is fairly rare."

"She saved my life."

"I did not mean it's a bad thing to be adopted," the espeon hurried to explain, trying to lift the misunderstanding. "Say, would you mind walking? There's a wood behind the school that the humans use as exercise ground, I'd like to go there. I don't like being in the open like this, and I don't want any pesky pokemon to be interrupting us."

On the one hand, I disliked the idea of going into a forest alone with another pokemon, but on the other hand, Agnes did say I could trust him and I felt like I agreed with what he had said. If I was famous, as Pride's trainer had said, then there was no doubt some pokemon would be staring.

"Alright," I agreed.

As we started walking, the espeon decided to engage in small talk, probably to try and make me more comfortable:

"Do you know where your name comes from?"

"Ruby? It's a red gem stone."

"I mean why Agnes named you that way."

"She loves gemstones. And... my fur is sort of red, so I guess Ruby was fitting."

"Oh, I like that. That makes you precious to her. How long did it take for her to find a name?"

"I don't know. She gave me the name after I was out of the pokemon centre. So... a week?"

"Interesting," he whispered as an answer, more for himself than for me.

"What?"

"She named you after something she loves only a week after meeting you, and shortly after adopting you. You're definitely very precious to her. I guess she wasn't lying when she said she trusts you."

"Why are you so interested in my name?" I pouted, unhappy with his judging what Agnes thought of me.

"I've come to the realisation that humans put a name on things thinking it helps them understand them. Even for things they don't understand, they have names ready. They give names to the people and animals they like. And, most of the time, these names have a meaning. Agnes didn't name you randomly - she named you after something she loved. I see two possibilities for this. First is, since humans are so intent on explaining and understanding everything, putting a label on something they don't understand gives them some form of control over it, and gives them the false impression that they have some level of understanding. Second is... it's a form of appropriation. Agnes gave you a name after she adopted you. She didn't ask you for your name, or try to ask you what you'd like to be called. Now... the name she chose is also interesting. I've heard my trainer talk about other pokemon names, and not all of them make sense to me, but I am certain they all make sense to the human who gave it. They give names based on what they think or feel about the pokemon. Agnes saved your life, which is surely something she's happy about, so you staying around makes her feel better. Like gems, I suppose? Hence the Ruby name. If she liked trees, she would probably have named you after a tree."

"What is your point?"

"My point is, humans are interesting, and names in particular have a very special place in their hearts."

"What about yours, then? Why are you named Pride?"

"Do you actually want to hear the story?"

"Yes," I replied, absolutely genuine.

We had reached the woods the espeon had mentioned and stopped walking, sitting down on a pack of leaves. I felt powerfully outsmarted by that pokemon, who appeared to be even more intelligent than Topa, and his opinion on names made me curious to know where his came from.

"I used to be wild, like you," he said. "Sean grew up in a town not far from here, on the other side of the White Hat. He and his family were hiking through the mountains, and when they were on a break to eat, they noticed I had been spying on them. His parents didn't care, but he was curious. What struck me most is that he didn't react the way most people do. When they see an animal, or a pokemon, they'll try to lure it closer, call it, give it food, just for a chance to pet it, right? He didn't. He didn't offer me any food, or try to lure me closer. He just said hello and waved at me, and seeing I wasn't reacting went back to his meal. I followed them and showed myself several times, but he never tried to lure me close to him. He would just wave hello, and continue if I didn't reply. I just followed him all day and he kept saying hello, but not once did he disrespect me by treating me like a random wild animal. He ended up hiking often through the same path, and I'd follow him every time. At one point I decided to test him, and came up to him to give him a random rock I found."

Pride smiled. These were obviously very happy memories for him.

"He took it and thanked me, but didn't try touching me or anything. He even gave me something back. It was the first time I had been treated so considerately and even given something. After that, I just hiked with them. His parents didn't seem to care and were very indifferent, but he was very happy. I had to push him myself before he dared touch me. We just played together while hiking. In the evening, before going back to his house, he asked me if I wanted to go home with him."

"Agnes didn't ask me... she just said 'I'm adopting her' and when I was out of the pokemon centre, I was her pokemon."

There was a distinct sadness in my voice. I had never thought about it before, but I had never had a choice in the situation. I had been too overwhelmed by the transformation to realise it, then too busy with my new life unfolding, but I had basically been adopted. Pride, on the other hand, made the conscious decision to follow his human.

"How did he come to name you Pride then?" I asked.

"I was proud. I found a human that treats me with respect and doesn't consider me less intelligent than he is. You won't find many of these. He just noticed and named me after that."

"Do you like your name?"

"I do! It's a reminder of how I got to meet Sean. What about you? Do you like yours?"

I didn't answer. I was envious of his story, which felt so much better than mine. I had just been... kidnapped. Not only had I been stolen from my previous life, but even my new life had been stolen from its previous life. There was absolutely nothing I had a say in, not even the job I was going to work.

"Why are you following your trainer?" I asked, broken hearted.

"He's my friend. We've spent more than a week slowly building a relationship, and now we're going to be working together. I'm happy to be with him for his job."

"Do you spend time with him?"

"Of course! Outside of classes, we play a lot, practice together, exercise together. I sleep with him either on his bed or by his side."

It took him a few seconds to realise why I was silent, staring at the dirt below my paws.

"You don't do that with Agnes?"

"No," I replied bluntly after a moment of silence.

Pride gave a hint of movement several times, only to stay back, seemingly hesitating on what he should be doing. He had certainly not planned the conversation would turn this way.

"Surely there's something you two do together, right?"

"No," I replied. "Sometimes she helps the maids when it comes to washing me, but... I have an assigned maid that does everything. Agnes... I don't spend time with Agnes."

My voice broke as I was saying that, the unpleasant feeling of tears forming growing in my throat.

"Well, she still loves you," Pride said, attempting to cheer me up. "The maid is just doing her job, but Agnes considers you a friend."

"I'm not a friend," I whispered. "I'm just a pet."

There was a long silence after this, during which I was focusing on not crying. I had never looked at it that way, but now that Pride mentioned it, I felt like Agnes didn't actually love me. She didn't have the same behaviour towards me as I did towards my pets, and she certainly didn't long to spend time with me. What if I was wrong and she only had adopted me because of a moral obligation after saving my life? Then she didn't actually love me. Was that true of others too? What about Topa?

I felt like my stomach turned inside out when I thought about her. Was she feeling towards me the way I felt towards Agnes? Did she genuinely love me, and my constant refusal to play with her gave her the feeling I didn't love her back? Did I unconsciously hurt her with my hesitations?

"Cheer up," Pride said, still unsure whether or not he could touch me. "You're wounded now, and even when she adopted you, you were. I'm sure she's just scared of hurting you. Show her you want to

spend time with her. Ask her for a bit of her time. I'm sure she'll oblige."

I was reminded of Topa explicitly saying she wanted to play with me, and her sad reaction after I refused so bluntly. She was definitely depressed, and it was my fault - because I didn't love her as much as I should have. I loved Agnes with all my heart, and Topa knew that - did she want the love I had for my human for herself? Was she jealous of it? Her behaviour didn't reek of jealousy - it felt more like she was... lonely. She spent her time with me, even if it was just watching me struggle to learn to breathe fire. As soon as I became better, she started asking me to play with her. I had been with her for about forty days, and for each and every one of them she had taken on her time to stay with me, nurse me, and make sure I was getting better, but I had done absolutely nothing for her in return. I couldn't even get over myself to play with her.

"Are you alright?" the espeon asked, worried.

"I'll be fine," I replied after a deep breath.

Thinking back about Topa, I felt awful about how bad a friend I had been to her. I had no reason to be so focused on myself anymore, now that my situation was better, and I was resolute to fix that.

It took me a few minutes to get a hold of myself, but once I had control of my emotions, I turned to the espeon, going back to the original reason why we were together. I felt like I could trust him, and he certainly seemed very friendly.

"So, why are we here? What does Agnes want from you?"

"She hasn't told you?"

"No, she said she had a surprise. I guess you're the surprise?"

"I hope I'm a good surprise then! I'm going to teach you to use your psychic powers."

Chapter 25

I remained speechless for a few seconds, unable to understand how that was a surprise or what it actually meant.

"Why?" I eventually asked.

Pride's head bobbed back in surprise.

"You don't want to learn that?"

"Of course I do," I replied sharply. "But where does this come from?"

"Oh. Agnes wants you to become stronger, and part of that includes learning new moves and new powers. From what I've been told, you live with a ninetales, and you have Pico around too, so you won't need more help with your fire powers. The ninetales can also teach you other moves that you might need, so Agnes wanted to focus on your psychic powers. They might not be of much use for you in an actual fight, but they will help you develop stronger powers over time and unlock paths to new moves your friends might not know."

My heart pinched painfully when Pride mentioned Agnes wanted me stronger, but as hurt as I felt by the comment, I couldn't disagree. Were it not for Pico punting the houndour away, I probably would have been killed. Contrary to what Ilma had said, all my intelligence was unable to help me in the fight, and I had to learn to rely on raw instincts and skill. That would probably come as I practised and was taught how to fight, but learning new moves sounded like a reasonable way to help me develop my powers, while gaining battling and fighting experience in the process.

"What makes you think that I even have psychic powers?"

The espeon's eyes widened.

"All vulpix have psychic powers," he replied.

"What? But... Topa said otherwise."

"Who's Topa?"

"The ninetales I live with. She said that not all vulpix do."

Pride chuckled nervously. He clearly wasn't sure whether I was asking a genuine question or just being negative because of my recent fight.

"I'm not sure what she told you, but you must have misunderstood. Every vulpix has psychic powers, although some are better than others at them. She probably just meant that she doesn't know how to use hers."

"I guess," I replied after a momentary silence, not willing to continue the conversation.

I clearly remembered her wording, and there was no room for doubt. She did say that not all vulpix had psychic powers, and she in particular did not.

"What about Ghost-type moves?" I asked.

"Same," he replied. "All vulpix have some. Does she not know any either?"

"She does," I hazarded. "At least, she knows Confuse Ray."

"Ah, Confuse Ray. Great one! You should learn it as soon as you can."

"I'd like to, but..."

Thinking back about all the moves I knew for certain Topa knew, the one I wanted to learn most was Will-O-Wisp. After a short hesitation, I admitted that to the espeon.

"Will-O-Wisp is more difficult to use in a battle, I think," he explained. "I am no expert, though. Topa certainly knows more than I do about that."

"She doesn't want to teach me it," I whined.

"I can understand why. It's a difficult move to learn. There are easier moves you should know first that can be used in battle."

I ostensibly sulked, unhappy about him agreeing with Topa. This only lasted a short moment, as my thoughts came back to what I had just been told. If all vulpix did have psychic moves, why did Topa tell me otherwise?

"So, what do you think?" Pride asked me, cutting my thinking short.

"Heh... fine," I replied without enthusiasm. "I don't know what I can use psychic powers for anyway. What moves can I even learn?"

"Extrasensory at the very least," Pride started listing, taking time to think. "Maybe Hypnosis, but few vulpix are able to learn it. And, outside of pokemon battles, you're all capable of basic telekinesis."

"I see," I whispered.

The idea of being able to move objects with my mind was appealing, but it sounded like I wouldn't be able to use it for anything but showing off. It was a bit of a downer, knowing that I was capable of such great powers, but that I would be so limited.

"And you can learn Dark-type moves too," Pride suddenly said, excited. "Vulpix is such a wonder. I don't know many pokemon that can learn moves from all three sides of the psychic triangle."

"The what?"

"The psychic triangle. Psychic, Ghost, and Dark. They are very similar in how they work, and they have similar effects."

"Like what?"

"In a battle, all three types use a pokemon's own power against them. For example, psychic and extrasensory will make you detonate a pokemon's reserve of energy to damage them. Nightmare will have a similar effect on a drowsy pokemon. Torment will lock your foe's powers after they use a move. There are also some summoning moves, like Bite for Dark, Shadow Ball for Ghost, and Psychic Fangs for Psychic. Of course, there are differences, but the global principle behind them is similar. In the same fashion, humans group the Ground, Rock, and Steel types together, but also Water, Fire, and Grass. Those are the three primary type triangles. Then there's Fighting, Normal, Flying, that forms the physical triangle since all of these types can only produce physical attacks, and Bug, Dragon, and Fairy, that form the animal triangle. Those are the secondary triangles. Ice, Electric, and Poison, aren't really grouped with anything as they all work quite uniquely."

"I see."

I didn't remember ever hearing of such grouping, but it did make sense, even with what I knew of the games.

"What's special about that, then?"

"Vulpix is one of the few pokemon that can access the psychic triangle despite not sharing any of its types," Pride answered. "That also gives you access to very interesting moves like Will-O-Wisp, which is commonly associated with and mistaken for a Ghost-type move, or Protect, which is a Normal-type move but gets mistaken for a Psychic one. This led to a lot of rumours about vulpix and ninetales, since those three types in particular are fascinating for humans."

"I've probably heard some," I sighed, raising my eyes to the sky.

Pride smiled.

"Vulpix is a popular pokemon in households. Unfortunately, they are generally rather weak in combat, and there are far better choices for the military, so it's not a common pokemon around here."

"Military? What?"

"You're part of the military," Pride replied, surprised. "You didn't know?"

"But... I don't want to be a soldier!"

Especially after hearing Ilma's story, the idea of being a soldier and going to war was rather terrifying.

To my surprise, Pride laughed.

"You won't be a soldier, silly! The military refers to any humans with the right to bear arms. This includes, of course, the army, but also policemen and special forces. You won't be going to war."

I looked away, embarrassed by my mistake. This wasn't what the word meant in my world. Were there other words that had their meaning changed?

"Will you be teaching me other moves?" I inquired.

"Once you are comfortable with at least telekinesis, sure! I'm not sure which ones you'll be able to learn, but we can try with basic ones. Telekinesis is the most important, though."

"Why? It can't be used in combat."

Pride smiled.

"Ilma would have loved that remark. It implies that, for you, combat is the most important. I would disagree with that, but to each their own, right? The thing about telekinesis is it's the base for almost every psychic move ever, and it's going to make it easier for you to learn them. Trying to learn even Protect without being capable of

telekinesis is a hassle. Think of it as... breathing fire for fire-type moves. It's the basics."

"I don't want to learn Protect," I pouted.

"We'll see about that later! Telekinesis first."

"So... when do we start?"

"Not today, I fear," Pride replied. "We should be able to start soon though. Generally when humans are eating, so we have about two hours every day for that. Agnes doesn't want you to start yet until she's certain you're healed."

"I'm fine," I commented with assurance.

"That's for Agnes to decide."

I wasn't exactly happy with that, but I could only understand Agnes' caution. Still, the idea of spending my lunch breaks being trained by another pokemon, especially one as strong as Pride, was very enticing, and I found myself looking forward to it.

However... I was puzzled by Topa's weird wording. "I do not have any" was what she said. There was no room for interpretation here. Did she purposely lie to me, or had she simply used the wrong words? I didn't recall any times when I even considered she could have been lying to me, and I didn't see why she should, but this felt very odd to me.

"So..." Pride whispered, leaning closer to me. "How do you like the idea?"

I took some time to think about it. What good would those powers be for me? I wasn't even sure what exactly I was going to be taught. Telekinesis? By the sounds of it, it would be completely useless to me. Why not start directly with more useful moves?

Even then... What was the difference between actual psychic powers and their unpower version? Would I be using the same sort of powers for telekinesis as I would be for Extrasensory? I could feel that breathing real fire and throwing an Ember were different processes. Would it be the same for this type, or any other?

"I don't know. It sounds like it's going to take a lot of work. I..."

I stopped myself, conscious that I almost made a big mistake. I couldn't be talking about how difficult it had been for me to learn Ember. How much was I supposed to know about other pokemon's powers? Topa seemed to be very knowledgeable, but she was significantly older and she was probably taught by her mother, or listening in on Melissa's lessons. I was supposedly still a child, and no one knew what happened to my biological mother.

My body's mother... Was she even alive? Had she been frantically looking for her child? Did she know that her kit had been killed? What would happen if I stumbled upon her, as I would certainly not recognise her?

"Hey."

Pride poked me with his tails, stroking the top of my head.

"Of course it's going to take work. Especially in the beginning, when you learn to recognise psychic powers. Then you'll have to learn to reproduce them, and that's just for telekinesis. I don't know how long it took you to learn to breathe fire and Ember, but expect this to take a lot longer."

"That's not very encouraging," I pouted.

Apparently, it was normal for kits to struggle with learning their first powers, but I was still unsure whether or not they were supposed to struggle less than I did. Topa said that I was learning fast, but that could have been just to cheer me up.

"Do you think I can do it?" I asked, looking for some support.

"Certainly. I haven't seen how good you are with your current powers, nor would I really be able to tell, but Pico said you were particularly intelligent. Psychic ability is closely related to intelligence, so if Pico is right, you should be doing really well."

I was surprised to hear what Pico thought. Was I actually particularly intelligent? I remembered feeling less intelligent than Topa, which made me rather depressed at the time, but I didn't know how smart other pokemon were supposed to be. Was the vulpix evolution line among the most intelligent pokemon? What about psychic types, like espeon?

"I'm not particularly intelligent," I complained.

"Doesn't matter," Pride replied. "If you work hard enough, you'll be able to learn these powers. Just don't expect it to take an hour, but be patient and have discipline."

I looked away. My enthusiasm was pretty much gone, and the espeon was mostly to blame for that, but I knew he was right. I needed to work as hard as I could. By learning new powers, I had a greater chance to convince Topa to teach me more, and I could even perhaps figure out something that would make it easier for me to learn more in the future.

"Alright," I conceded. "I'll try. Are we going to practice battling or only telekinesis?"

"Only telekinesis for the time being, but battling would be interesting once you learn some moves. I have to admit I hadn't considered the idea, but now that you mention it, I would love to battle with you one day."

There was no way battling with that monster would be interesting. He could probably knock me out in a few seconds. I had absolutely no

experience in battling, while he did, and probably not just from police school.

"I don't want to battle with you," I sighed. "You're too strong."

"You will be strong too eventually," Pride answered, patting me on the back. "But you'll have to work hard."

We didn't talk much after that. Although my motivation was gone, I was looking forward to being stronger - strong enough to be able to battle with him.

Back at the mansion, I looked for Topa inside, but she was nowhere to be found. Assuming she was just in the gardens, I went to my pillow, jumping on the chance to plan the talk properly. I was looking forward to talking to her and clear that confusion, but at the same time, I was nervous and strangely cautious. I felt like I should avoid the subject, but I had to know, and chasing her to bring it up was certainly not a good idea. She would inevitably ask why Agnes wanted me to go to school despite my wounds, and all I had to do was describe my discussion with Pride and his idea to raise the question naturally. I wasn't quite sure how to ask her... or even what exactly to ask. It would probably be best to let things unfold and follow the conversation.

She came back right in time for dinner, followed by Melissa. After eating, we went back to her room as expected, but I noticed something that put me off. Her scent was weird. It was less strong, as if she were less herself than usual. The odours from the outside were still abnormally noticeable on her fur, and even poking her with my muzzle left a lasting mark. Her personal scent was overwhelmed by others, making me feel like she was occulted by the world. This could surely be used to her advantage in a survival situation, but I had the feeling that it was neither normal nor even controlled. Some alarm was ringing loudly in my head, and I was unable to switch it off, or even listen to it.

"How was your day?" I asked, breaking the silence.

Topa seemed to be surprised by me being the one to start a conversation, but I noticed an ephemeral smile on her beautiful face.

"Quite nice!" she replied with her normal enthusiasm. "I spent a lot of time playing with Melissa after she came back from school. I am rather tired, but it was certainly fun."

She didn't look the slightest bit tired, but she did have Melissa's scent on her. Her heart was beating slightly faster than usual, but it wasn't an indication of anything.

"What did you play?" I pushed, actually interested.

"Lots of running. She has physical training lessons... I believe she calls them sports class? There will be exams soon and she wanted to train beforehand, so I joined her. I do not know what her exams consist of, but we simply ran from one end of the garden to the other. When she got tired, we played with a ball until she decided she had enough."

I looked away with a knot in my stomach. I remembered the conversation with Pride and how Agnes never did anything with me. Melissa seemed to spend at least some time playing with Topa, and even if it were just stupid games like running or throwing a ball, I found myself wishing my own trainer would play those with me. Was I even a pet for her? I played with my pets a lot when I was human, and I was certain that they appreciated it, but Agnes didn't play with me. I was probably just... a tool for her job, and not even a pet.

"Are you alright?" Topa whispered, worried.

I didn't realize that my ears and tails were laid, giving away obvious hints that I was not all that happy, and shook my head to give myself better control of them. It would probably be best to be honest with her, as that would invite honesty back, and it would probably help me bring the subject I wanted to talk about.

"I'm fine, it's just that..."

Would mentioning Pride now be a good idea? If I just threw my ideas without a context, Topa would assume that I was depressed again, which was wrong - although Pride's story about his trainer did make me rather upset about my own relationship with mine - and I needed to make her see that I wasn't if I wanted to be trusted. If I showed any signs of not being well, she would probably refuse to talk seriously for fear to hurt me.

"I'm a bit upset," I ended up carefully admitting.

"Is it related to what you did at school? Did something happen?"

I smiled internally. Her bringing up the school topic was a lot better for me, and I could mention Pride and our talk far more easily and naturally. All I had to do now was talk about him, repeat his story and compare it to mine, then mention the psychic powers and feint enthusiasm then confusion so that I could ask her if she really meant that she didn't have any, or simply that she didn't know how to use them.

"I met an espeon called Pride. We talked about... how we met our human and..."

The knot in my stomach seemed to tighten as my airways felt blocked for a fraction of a second, as if I were choking for one heartbeat.

I repeated Pride's story as well as I remembered it, and mentioned the discussion that followed.

"I was born in this family," Topa said. "I was not even aware it was possible for humans to ask pokemon to come with them. I imagined all pokemon were either born in their family or adopted like you were. This is interesting."

She stayed silent for a few seconds.

"Why does this make you upset?" she eventually inquired.

"Agnes doesn't do anything with me. I'm... I'm not even a pet for her."

"She is just being cautious. You get injured fairly often, it is only fair to be careful."

"You can't throw the she's cautious excuse all the time," I pouted. "She just doesn't want to do anything with me outside of school."

The conversation wasn't taking the turn I was hoping for. I needed to get it back on track and bring up the other topic.

"No," I said. "She didn't make me meet Pride because she was worried about me. It was about my performances at school."

"Oh," she whispered after a short hesitation. "What was it about then?"

I looked away. There was no way I could feign excitement or enthusiasm anymore, considering the turn the conversation had taken.

"She thinks I'm too weak," I admitted. "She wants Pride to teach me how to use my psychic powers so I can start learning new moves."

I closely watched Topa's reaction, but noticed nothing odd.

"That is a good idea," she agreed. "We can work on fire-type moves at home in parallel to training with Pride at school. This will be a lot of effort, though. Are you sure you can handle it?"

Unhappy about how easily she had changed the topic, I muttered a sharp "yeah" that sounded a lot angrier than I meant to show.

"I don't want to be taken care of by another evolved pokemon," I pouted, trying to justify my angry response. "What are others going to think? I'd rather learn psychic powers from you."

"I cannot teach you. I told you before that I do not have any psychic powers."

She was insisting on that exact wording. I needed to probe further.

"Why would I have any then?"

"Most vulpix are capable of it. The chances you are not are very low."

There was no room for error. Pride said that all vulpix had psychic powers, and Topa was clearly saying otherwise. Who should I believe? Should I bring it up now? It felt like a perfect opportunity, but I wasn't sure how to mention it without sounding like I was accusing Topa of lying.

I didn't realise that my head was moving on its own, slightly tilted, while my eyes were surveying the room as if I could find my answers written on the walls. Topa picked up on that movement.

"Are you alright? You look confused."

I secretly gasped, less from surprise than from relief. This was perfect.

"Pride said..."

I hesitated, still unsure what I should be saying. I knew Topa was feeling sad, and I was afraid of how she would react if it sounded like I was accusing her of not telling me the truth.

"He said that all vulpix have psychic powers, and that you too should have some. But you say you don't, so... I'm not sure who to believe."

Topa's eyes widened slightly and she remained silent for several minutes, seemingly deep in thought. Her heart was beating a lot faster, and it was rather clear that she was nervous.

"I apologize," she eventually said. "My wording is confusing. Pride is correct in saying that all vulpix are able to use psychic powers."

"What about you, then?" I pushed. "You said you didn't have any."

She looked away, clearly uncomfortable.

"Sorry," she simply whispered.

Turning her back to me, she nested on her pillow and didn't say a single word. I was sitting on mine, looking down on her, and although I should be feeling victorious to have outsmarted her and correctly guessed that she had lied to me, I was feeling miserable. She was completely motionless in front of me, and although I could hear her heart beating, she looked like she wasn't even alive. I nested on my own pillow, turning my back to her as well, cursing myself for going too far in an attempt to figure out the truth.

Chapter 26

The day after, although Topa's behaviour was fairly normal, I quickly picked up on the fact something was wrong with her. Her own scent was still so faint on her that it felt like but a remnant of what it used to be. She barely ate anything for breakfast, and after that, went directly to the gardens without saying a word. None of the humans seemed to have noticed, and I was angry at them for it, but most of all I was angry with myself for being the cause for her problems. Her behaviour was definitely symptomatic of depression, at least how I was used to encountering it. Was her scent feeling faint another symptom of it? After she left, I went to my pillow, tracking the events of the past few weeks to try and figure out when exactly she started being so down and what I did to make it worse. There was no doubt that my finding out that she had lied was the major factor, but I was certain there was something else that I hadn't yet noticed.

The earliest occurrence I remembered of Topa feeling sad was when we first talked about the White Hat and the Gloss Forest. I remember she had been rather intent on visiting both, especially the forest, but I didn't see any way this would make her this depressed. Was there something about them that she wasn't telling me? Were there other things about which she lied? I felt like I could still trust her, given how honest her answers to my questions were, but at the same time, I realised that I barely knew anything about her. All I knew was that she only ever mentioned her mother, who was a pet for this family as well, and died shortly after she was born. I didn't know who her father was, and she didn't even feel sad mentioning her mother's death, but I didn't know if she had any siblings, and if so, where they were now. Could that third vulpix scent I picked up in the cage belong to a sibling she had? I remembered it being stronger than Topa's scent, which probably meant that it had been left more recently, but I didn't know anything else about it. I was, at the time, unable to properly use my amazing sense of smell, and my memories of the odour were not vivid enough to analyse it.

That would typically be the sort of question I should simply ask Topa, but given the circumstances, asking her anything personal was too risky. I wasn't trying to scout for more information: I was only trying to figure out what I did wrong and why she was so depressed. If it wasn't about her family, then what could it be?

"Topa isn't with you?" a voice asked me through the door.

The sudden noise made me jolt upright from my laying position. I was so focused on my thoughts that I didn't hear the person coming, but it took me no time to recognise the odour and the voice. Agnes was standing by the open door, dressed in a very simple casual dress. She looked stunningly pretty.

Now that I was standing, I took the time to stretch with a yawn before joyfully hopping into Agnes' legs. Crouching to pet me, she scanned the room, looking for the ninetales.

"Odd. At this time you're usually in the training room playing with her. Did you two have a fight?"

She giggled while saying that, as if the idea was absurd, but she had no idea how correct she was. I looked away, overwhelmed with guilt.

"That's alright, it happens. She still loves you and you two will play together again very soon. Well, if she isn't around, it's fine. You're the one I wanted to talk to."

There was a hint of excitement in her voice. She came in the room and sat by the pillows, hinting at me to follow her. I jumped on her lap, nesting there as she was talking.

"You've never done it before, so I'll try to explain as well as I can. Together with Melissa and Topa, we have a bit of a monthly ritual. See the river that runs right by the house? It takes its source from a lake in the mountains, not too far from the White Hat. The lake is owned by my family and we've been keeping people off of it for as long as we've owned this house, but every month, we spend a day

there as a sort of vacation. It's a beautiful place, and the water is cold and pure. It's perfect for relaxing! We haven't gone the past two months because I found you and I wanted to stay with you to make sure you were doing well, but I'm pretty sure you're perfectly healed now and we can go back. I think a bit of fresh air would do you some good, too."

She paused, as if to ask me for my opinion. Was it the reason why Topa was so upset? Agnes did mention that they had missed two of those trips because of me. Were these so important for Topa that it made her sad not to have gone for two months?

Realising that my human was waiting for a response, I yelped quietly, trying to show a bit of enthusiasm.

"Don't worry," she said with a soft voice. "We're starting to plan it. We'll be going early in the morning, hiking through the woods, and staying at the lake all day. We'll sleep there and come back in the morning on Sunday."

I liked the idea of it, and I was hoping that going there would help Topa feel better.

"We're going next week," Agnes added, pushing me off of her lap and dusting her bottom. "You don't need to prepare anything, but I wanted to let you two know. I hope you're looking forward to it, because I am!"

I couldn't say I was very excited by the idea, as I had much more important things in mind, but at the same time, I felt like this would be a great opportunity to bond with my trainer. I could still hear Pico mentioning his relationship with his human, and I was so envious of it it made me dizzy. Even Topa had a much stronger relationship with Melissa than I with Agnes. I was the only pokemon in my social circle that wasn't actually loved by their trainer.

The only one I knew loved me was Topa, but I didn't deserve it. For forty days, ever since I was taken from the hospital by Agnes, she

had been watching after me, patiently listening to me and trusting everything I said, and teaching me as much as she could about this world and how my new body worked. I had never done anything in return, insisting on learning more and questioning her endlessly instead. My insight as a human was completely useless to her, as she was probably more intelligent than I, and none of my knowledge seemed to be interesting either. She had been the only one giving, taking on her time to make sure I was progressing.

What should I do? I was aware that my probing for information had gone too far, but how could I repair that? Did I need to try and give her time of my own, to show her that I did care? Should I be talking with her to try and settle the issue I raised? Would she feel better knowing we would be going to the mountains? On the contrary, would that make her depression worse?

I was stuck. Everything I thought I could do had a chance to make her feel worse and I didn't know if it was worth taking the risk. There was also a chance that she'd get better on her own, but considering I was the cause for her predicament, I had the feeling that I had to do something. I just didn't know what.

That weekend was by far the most boring and unpleasant one I spent since I became a vulpix. Topa was basically avoiding me, spending all her time in the gardens, while I was lounging on my pillow. I did not have the heart to go and find her yet, for I had no idea what to even say, and whenever we were together, there were no words spoken.

On Monday, as Agnes drove me to school, I couldn't stop thinking about Topa. We greeted Pico and Derek as usual, but my mind was elsewhere, and I couldn't let anyone know I was fretting. I did my best to act normal, and although it seemed to have worked, Pico's strangely withdrawn behaviour made me think he had noticed and was giving me space.

"Alright, let's go," Agnes suggested, heading to the pool.

I reluctantly followed, but was quickly stopped.

"Not you," Pico whispered. "Today is the exam for swimming classes, and considering you've missed yours, you don't have anything to do."

"What do I do then?"

"I'm not sure."

He then barked gently at Derek, then pointed at me with his muzzle. Agnes understood first:

"Oh, right. Ruby, you can't come to the pool because there's an exam. You need to catch up on swimming lessons and we'll go to the makeup exam together. For now... go to the gym. Don't worry, you won't be alone - there are people assigned to watch over the inactive pokemon now. Also, doctor Belish will pick you up at some point to check your wounds. You won't be alone for too long."

She knelt and kissed me on the head as if to reassure me, before stepping into the pool out of my sight. Pico looked at me with wavering eyes before following, and I dragged myself to the gym.

It was completely empty, save for the policeman in uniform standing silently by the door. He reminded me of the guards that were protecting the mansion at night, and although he seemed less scary, I didn't imagine he would be very friendly. I walked up to a corner and nested there.

"Are you alone?" a voice I knew asked after what felt like hours.

I turned around, surprised. Ilma was walking up to me, wearing her usual strict face, although I had the feeling it became a little brighter as she came close to me. She still smelled of chlorine and water.

"Yes," I replied. "I guess everyone's in class."

"Correct," she confirmed.

"Why are you here, if I may? What about the exam?"

"I'm just an instructor," she giggled as if my question were absurd. "I don't grade the exams. I just went to give the pokemon directions as to what to do. There are a lot of people in the pool, too, so I figured I could go for a walk instead of watching everyone struggle."

"I see," I whispered, looking away.

Something wet poked me near the back of my neck.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"You smell sad," she replied. "Also, you're usually a little more outgoing than this. Is something on your mind?"

"No," I lied.

It was probably not the right time to bother anyone with my problems, especially not an instructor at school.

"Are you sure?" she insisted. "Lying to a superior is an offence, you know. I can tell that there's something wrong, so talk to me. It's not like there's anyone around to spy on us, right?"

I sighed.

"I think I..."

My voice cracked as my throat seemed to collapse on itself. It took me a few tries to get the words out.

"I think I've hurt someone I love. I don't know how to... fix it."

There was a short silence. Ilma was apparently waiting for more. She simply sat down next to me.

I took a deep breath, trying to sort my thoughts to explain the situation as best I could without revealing too much.

"She's been taking care of me since Agnes adopted me," I started. "But lately... she's been asking to play with me and I've refused. I just want to learn to fight. And..."

How could I mention that I figured out Topa lied about her powers without giving away that I didn't know anything about them? Was it normal for a vulpix my age to be so ignorant?

"Who are you talking about?" Ilma asking, capitalizing on my break.

"Topa. Agnes' sister's ninetales."

"Oh, I see. She's been mentioned before. So, what happened?"

"I recently found out she had been lying to me about something. She originally said that she didn't have any psychic powers, but... Pride said every vulpix and ninetales has psychic powers. I confronted her about it and..."

I looked away in shame.

"She's been so depressed since. She doesn't even smell like herself. I'm worried."

"Her own scent being weak is a symptom of depression," Ilma said. "Your body constantly produces something called pheromones, which you can smell - humans can't, by the way. They're linked to all sorts of scents. For example, you can tell an animal's mood based on the pheromones they produce. In this case, when a person or animal is depressed, their body produces less of them, among other things, so their own scent becomes fainter. There are other symptoms, like being withdrawn, loss of appetite, trouble sleeping, and so on."

"That sounds like her," I whispered.

I was aware of the behavioural symptoms of depression, but I had no idea that the body was producing less pheromones. That at least explained why Topa's odour had been feeling so weak.

"I don't know what to do," I confessed. "I feel guilty. It's my fault if she's depressed."

"It might be," Ilma replied, thinking. "But... you shouldn't feel guilty about it. If your inquiring about her psychic powers makes her react this way, it means that there was something she was already fragile about related to them. I don't think you've caused anything, at least not directly. Also, the fact that she wanted you to think she doesn't have any proves that there's something about psychic powers, or at least her own, that she's trying to avoid. It might be good to dig further into it, but you'd have to be careful."

"I don't want to dig further," I replied. "I want her to feel better. I don't want to see her depressed."

"Getting her to talk about whatever is bothering her will help, believe me. But... it's going to be difficult for her."

I looked away. I didn't like that solution. There had to be a better one.

"Is there anything I can do to lift her mood?"

"No," Ilma replied bluntly. "She's depressed. There is nothing you can do to make her feel better now. And if you try, it's likely to make her actually feel worse."

"Why?"

"Depressed people tend to lose confidence and blame themselves for everything. If you attempt to make her feel better, she's going to blame herself for causing you worry and wasting your time. She's also going to deny that she's depressed or that she needs help. It's not that she isn't aware of it, but she's going to think she's not worth your time. Don't try to force a talk on her either - trying to reason with

her is likely not going to work because she's going to be stuck in loops of negativity."

"What do I do then?"

"Stay with her. Show her you care, but don't probe and don't insist on trying to help her. She just needs to know that you love her and you'll support her, but the first effort has to come from her, not from you."

"How do I do that?"

"Be supportive. The way to do that depends entirely on the person, but in general, you need to stay around her but not be too intrusive. If she wants to isolate herself, let her for a time, then join her in whatever place she's decided to hide in. If she lets you in, just stay there, share some activities, talk if she's in the mood, but don't question her or try to help her. Don't change your behaviour, as she's going to associate that with you trying to make her feel better. If she wants to play, it would be best to continue refusing until your body heals. If she feels like you only accept out of pity, it's going to take a toll on her. Dealing with depressed people is extremely difficult because they're fragile, and even with the best of intentions and doing the best of actions, it's possible to dig them so far down they won't get back up."

I sighed, my throat clenching painfully as I was about to cry.

"Whatever happened to her, it's clearly left a mark, so much so that she tried to hide her powers from you. You need to show her that you don't care about her powers, or about her lying to you. Don't sugarcoat either, or pretend she wasn't lying - she knows she was, and she knows you know. Just show her that it doesn't matter and you still love her all the same. If she wants to tell you the truth later, accept. If she doesn't, accept. She needs proof that her lying didn't change the way you think of her."

"I don't know why she would lie," I admitted. "She's always so honest and straightforward. The fact she lied about this is... it feels like I've

been betrayed."

Ilma shook her head.

"That's the wrong way to think about it. That's also how she probably feels now, and she fears you might not forgive her. There's probably a good reason why she's trying to hide her powers. Don't blame her."

I blushed.

"What if she doesn't get better? What do I do?"

"Whether or not she gets better will depend on how you behave," Ilma said. "Don't screw up."

That was too much weight on my shoulders. I couldn't do that.

"Hey," Ilma said, poking me with her muzzle. "She's been taking care of you since you came to her, and now she needs help. It's your turn to take care of her."

Tears began rolling down on my cheeks.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I just want her to be happy."

"Don't apologise to me. Don't apologise to her either. Just do what I said, and she'll eventually get better. It might be a long process, but both of you need to make the right effort."

Unable to contain myself any longer, I slowly crawled to Ilma's legs and put my head against them, crying silently. She lifted a paw and patted my head gently, letting me cuddle with her until I stopped crying and she headed to the doctor's office.

As expected, Ilma's trainer came to pick me up after what felt like an hour. We were no longer cuddling, and Ilma was just sitting silently next to me, going back to her strict persona. Although she looked very happy to see Belish, she waited until he came to us to stand up. Following them to the doctor's office, I couldn't stop thinking about

how happy everyone I knew was to see their trainer, while seeing Agnes left me rather emotionless. What was I doing wrong in my relationship with her?

I was completely absent-minded as the doctor was checking on me. Although he announced with a smile that my paw was completely healed and my ear would not be a problem, I didn't react much, lost in my thoughts. I was silently spying on Ilma to see how she acted around her trainer, and it was obvious that she was happy despite the things she had seen at war. It was possible that what she went through in that battle together with Belish strengthened their relationship, but compared to them, Agnes and I felt like complete strangers.

Ilma picked up on it and questioned me when Belish left.

"You alright?"

I sighed.

"What am I doing wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm doing something wrong," I insisted. "I just... can't maintain a proper relationship with anyone. I've hurt Topa who was by far the closest to me, I'm basically not friends with anyone here, and Agnes is so distant from me she doesn't feel like she's my trainer at all."

"What about the flareon?"

"We've talked like three times. I can't say we're friends."

Ilma remained silent for a moment, thoughtful.

"I have to say," she commented, "you are by far the most anxious pokemon I have ever come across. I assume it's natural for you to be weary of everything since you've been adopted out of the wild, but you need to learn to trust others a little more."

"It's not that I don't trust others," I sighed. "I'm just... why is everyone so happy and I am not?"

Ilma looked at me, dubious.

"You say you have no friends," she noticed. "What does it mean for you to be friends with someone?"

"What do you mean?"

"At what point do you call someone your friend?"

I looked away, surprised by the question. How could I even know that?

"I don't know," I eventually answered in a whisper.

"Why do you worry so much about your relationships if you don't even know what you expect of them?"

I blushed, embarrassed. She made a good point, but I knew this wasn't going to help me. Unable to argue further, I buried myself in silence, until she decided it was time to bring me back to the gym to wait for the exam to finish.

I was pretending to be fine when Pico, Agnes, and Derek came out of the pool after their exam, but I was still upset despite Ilma's attempt to comfort me. I had to ensure that they didn't notice, as I didn't want to be questioned, but when Pride joined me around noon to ask if I was ready for the first lesson, I couldn't find any excuses for refusing. Luckily for me, Agnes was with me at the time, and said that she would be going back to the mansion with me when she saw the espeon walk towards me, correctly guessing he wanted to start teaching me how to use my psychic powers. There were no more classes for the day, and she wanted to eat at home.

"We need to think of a time when you'd be able to catch up on swimming lessons," Agnes said while driving. "There won't be a

second exam just for you, so you'll have to participate in the make-up exam in a few weeks. That gives us plenty of time but I'd rather have that done sooner than later. It probably won't be possible this week, but we might be able to start next Monday. Are you okay with it?"

I nodded. I understood Agnes' worry about the exams, as her studies seemed to be very important to her, but I had no idea when I would have time for swimming lessons, unless they replaced the time I was to spend with Pride. That wasn't exactly my main worry, but I needed to keep it in mind.

"I don't want to overbook you, but it's important. Think you can handle that and Pride's lessons?"

I nodded again.

"Great!" she smiled. "I'm looking forward to seeing you get better. Then we can have some real fun."

Can we? I couldn't help but think that her interest in me was fake and she was only acting out of self interest. I didn't feel like she was any close to me anymore. I knew I liked her a lot, but she didn't seem to return the feeling. The only one I knew loved me was Topa, and I had possibly ruined this for good by being too nosy.

I was completely miserable when we were finally back to the mansion. I had not realised how much I actually loved Topa and how much she meant to me, and the fact that I had hurt her was unforgivable. I needed to apologise properly and repair my mistake. Thinking about the advice Ilma gave me, I assumed it would be best to leave her alone for the time being, until I had a clue that she was more open and I could start being with her again.

Chapter 27

The day after, a Tuesday, was when I was to go back to classes. I felt slightly nervous going back after a week of absence, scared of what others might say, but Agnes seemed to be happy to finally have me back with her, and her enthusiasm quickly erased my worries. At school, we were greeted by Pico and Derek as usual, but unlike other days, everyone had gathered outside of the gym, which was closed. My anxiety immediately came back as I imagined it was because of me.

"What's going on, Pico?" I asked while we were waiting.

"Today's the start of pokemon classes," he replied with joy. "Did you forget?"

Pokemon classes? That did ring a bell to me, but I had been so preoccupied over the past week that I had completely forgotten.

"Yeah."

"Well, today and tomorrow, we'll have the brawling tournament."

It all came back to me in a flash. The school was organising this tournament to sort pokemon by physical prowess. This meant I had to fight other pokemon, and I was definitely not ready for it. I cursed myself, thinking I should have accepted Topa's idea of playing.

"I am so not ready for this," I whined.

"Don't worry," Pico replied, reassuring. "Most pokemon here have never been in a fight apart from playing. You're going to do better than you think!"

I looked at him, wondering how confident he was. Being evolved, he clearly had an enormous advantage, be it only from his weight. He

was probably going to win easily, and was likely aware of it. He was just being supportive.

My eyes were drawn to Agnes, who was smiling and didn't seem to share my level of stress. She wasn't the one who was going to fight, after all, but didn't seem to be worried about my performance at all. Noticing that I was looking at her, she gently lifted me and petted me, thinking I was requesting to be cuddled.

After a few minutes, once the whole class was here, the gym doors finally opened and the students stormed in. The gym itself had not changed much, but two massive screens had been added at one end of it, together with a stage with a computer on it. The monitors were showing a simple white background, waiting to be updated.

The floor, however, had drastically changed. Instead of the massive markings that spanned the entire gym before were now a series of circles similar to a pokeball. They were spread out in rows and would allow at least sixteen pairs of pokemon to fight simultaneously. Everyone noticed the changes, and most people and pokemon alike were very excited. I, on the other hand, was growing more nervous. Agnes picked up on that and hugged me tighter to reassure me, adjusting my position so that I was resting on her arm and breast.

A door opened on the end of the gym that had the monitors, and the director of the school appeared with his absol walking beside him. The entire gym became immediately silent seconds before the director's voice resonated through the building, modified by the microphone he was using.

"Hello everyone! I know you're all relieved that the exams are over, but classes continue, and as I explained before, this week marks the beginning of pokemon classes. These include pokemon vs pokemon battling and wrestling as well as pokemon vs human fighting. You've all probably noticed that you were given no more information on them, and that your seniors didn't say anything either. We wanted everyone to start on an equal footing and not be able to prepare ahead of time."

There was a loud noise coming from the audience, mostly people agreeing with the idea.

"We would like to prepare you for all situations," the director continued. "There are times when you might not have your pokemon with you to fight a criminal and their own pokemon, and you need to know how to handle that. Also, for your partners, being able to wrestle someone down without having to go into a battle will be useful and we want you to learn how to do it. Of course, the focus will be on pokemon battling classes, but don't ignore the other two."

He marked a break to clear his throat.

"We split the class in pairs for these lessons. That is the reason why there are only 64 students in the class. Now, in previous years, we used to have a series of physical exams for pokemon to sort them, but student feedback taught us that it was not all that fun for them and too exhausting. We aren't here to force you to do things you don't like doing, and we'd rather you enjoy the formation, so we decided to set up a tournament system instead, which we hope will be a lot more interesting for you. This is the first year we're doing this, so please give us as much feedback as you can on the system so that we can improve it for future classes."

The monitors changed their display, showing a tournament bracket system, with cases empty of names.

"We will be holding a double elimination system today. The winner and runner-up will be paired together, then third and fourth place. After that, there will be a 4-way tie for 5th place, 8-way tie for 9th place, and so on. This will result in several groups of equal pokemon. Tomorrow, we'll hold a pool system within these groups to determine a ranking within each of them, which will give us a final ranking across the entire class. After that, you'll be sorted in eight tiers of four pairs depending on your rank."

He stopped again, ensuring that everyone understood. Seeing that no one was speaking, he continued.

"The first opponents have been randomly chosen and the pairs randomly placed in the brackets. Now, one of you was recently temporarily expelled, and they automatically place last as a result, which means that we're missing one person today. One of you will receive a bye, so they won't have to fight the first round."

Everyone turned to Agnes and me, understanding perfectly what the director was referring to. Feeling like I was being blamed, I crawled on Agnes' shoulder, trying to hide, and she put me down on the ground with shaking hands so I could stand behind her legs.

"The bye will go to Ruby. We all know what happened, and I believe that she proved that she's more than capable of holding her own in a fight, so she deserves to pass on directly to next round."

A lot of the pokemon around nodded respectfully, although some of their trainers complained silently. Pico crept up to me, whispering:

"See? They all respect you. You were worried about how the fight would affect the way they see you, now you know."

I wasn't sure how to feel about it. They were just assuming that I had won the fight, but that wasn't what I thought. Pico very clearly saved me there, and I would probably have been killed without him.

The monitors changed again, filling the cases in with names that were too far for me to read. Trying to force on my eyes to see more clearly, I came to the realisation that pokemon were not supposed to be able to read, and I had to wait until Agnes read out my opponent for me.

"Naturally, there are rules. We're not here to maul each other. You've all seen the circles that replace the usual arena marking - these are the new arena. Your goal is either to push your opponent outside of it, or force them down for ten seconds. Biting and scratching are not allowed, and using moves is strictly forbidden. This isn't a battle - we're only here to test you all physically against one another."

I began wondering how pushing someone out of a circle on the ground was any relevant to a policeman's job, but my thinking was interrupted as the director resumed his explanation.

"Trainers will be responsible for making sure rules are respected and reporting any breaches to me. Of course, you aren't supposed to say anything before or during the fight. This is your pokemon's fight, not yours. Please remain silent, and once the match is done, come here to give me the winner. Once every match is finished, there will be a ten-minute break, and new matches will start. The tournament starts in fifteen minutes; find your opponent and get ready. Good luck!"

There was a short round of applause, then everyone gathered around the monitors. I came close enough to be able to read them, but kept what I learnt to myself. I was reassured to notice that I was completely opposite to Pico, which meant I likely wouldn't have to fight him. I was at the top of the bottom quarter of the bracket with my bye. I'd have to fight the winner between a growlithe and a houndour. Upon reading that, my stomach tightened, and I caught myself praying that the growlithe would win. Pico was fighting a poochyena at the very top of the bracket. Glossing over the list of pokemon, I was surprised to read that there were four electrike and five meowth, which were two pokemon I did not expect to see as part of the police. There were also two eevee apart from Pico, and as expected, no vulpix but me.

The director's absol came to me as everyone was pairing up and finding a circle to fight on.

"Hi," he said with a low-pitched voice that resonated strangely in my head. "Ruby, isn't it? Please come with me. As you are not fighting the first round, you may not watch others fight. We don't want you to have an advantage by knowing in advance how your future opponent fights."

Although the absol was extremely tall - about twice as tall as Pico - he didn't feel intimidating or scary. He looked particularly beautiful with his pure white fur and impressive chest mane, but was

respectfully standing back and showing no signs of animosity, and unlike Ilma who radiated a powerful aura, didn't seem to be any passively threatening. I followed him towards the stage.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I'm nervous," I said.

Was he trying to take my attention from the rest of the matches? Was he instructed to inquire about me, or was he simply talking so that I wouldn't be bored while waiting?

"Are you worried about your performance?"

"Of course I am. Everyone here is an adult and..."

I had completely forgotten that detail, but it struck me as if I was only realising it. My body was still very young, while everyone else here was significantly older.

"You're still young, but that won't matter. You shouldn't worry so much. Your result here won't affect your grade, and I doubt your trainer would be disappointed in you."

"She likely will be," I replied, somewhat disheartened. "There's no way I can hold my own against anyone."

"You did well against the houndour," the absol reminded me. "Ilma didn't exaggerate when she said you were overly negative. Have a bit more confidence. It will be important to learn to remain level-headed through all situations. Don't let your emotions get the best of you. I understand you're young and this is difficult for you, but you can work on that at your own pace."

His face was displaying a friendly, encouraging smile as he said that. I turned my head away, smiling shyly in response. At the same time, I felt annoyed: why was everyone so patronizing to me? Was it because I was still a child?

Derek was the first one to report the match result. I hadn't even noticed that they had started, and Pico had without a doubt crushed his opponent. He walked to me joyfully, hoping to chat while waiting, but seeing the absol next to me made him stop where he was and refrain. Turning around, I realised that a lot of pokemon were staring at me, some of them having even tried to walk towards me. I understood suddenly why the absol insisted to stay with me: he wanted to deter other pokemon from swarming me with questions. I was secretly thankful for that, as I was already nervous from the tournament itself and didn't need more stress on top of it.

When the first round was over, I peeked at the monitors to see who I would be fighting. To my delight, the houndour had lost against the growlithe, who I would be facing next round. Unfortunately, that didn't do anything to help me calm down, and as the director asked everyone to get ready for the next match, I felt like my heart was going to explode.

"Good luck, Ruby," the absol said before Agnes came to pick me up. "Don't worry so much about what others think of you. You'll do great."

If anything, his apparent trust in me was more pressure added to my shoulder than comfort. That was just one more person I was going to disappoint.

Agnes found my opponent surprisingly quickly in the sea of people and pokemon, and we headed towards a circle that was not already occupied. We both stepped in the circle, waiting for instructions from the director.

"Good luck!" the growlithe said in a friendly tone, apparently having a lot of fun with this tournament.

"Good luck," I replied, giving away my anxiety as my voice cracked slightly.

Agnes spent some time reminding me of the rules, but was interrupted by the director's digitally amplified voice.

"Is everyone ready?"

No one answered, which probably meant that everyone agreed. After a few seconds, the director gave us permission to start the matches.

The growlithe didn't wait. Almost instantly after the signal, he charged at me. Caught by surprise, I got hit right in the flank and thrown away, but not far enough to step out of the circle. The growlithe charged again as I was struggling to get back on my feet, but I successfully dodged by rolling to the side. I stood up and hopped closer to the centre of the circle, where I would be safer, and my opponent once again jumped at me. I pulled the same trick I did on the houndour when I was attacked, voluntarily falling onto my back. As expected the growlithe landed right above me, and I pushed him as hard as I could with my hind legs. He rolled over, confused, and I charged at him as well. Unfortunately, he was a lot stronger than me physically and had no trouble stopping me by crouching my attack. Seizing the opportunity, he slid his head under me, then lifted me entirely, making me fall to the side, before effortlessly pushing me out of the circle.

I remained in place for a few seconds upon realising that I had lost. The growlithe tried to come help me up, but I refused, extremely upset. Agnes came to pick me up, congratulating my opponent on his victory, and went on to report the result.

I was a failure. Despite everything that Ilma, Pico, or the absol said, I had been completely outclassed in my first fight. Of course I would be, considering everyone here was so much older and stronger than me. Why did anyone have any expectations of me? I wasn't even a vulpix. If they knew, they'd probably not have trusted me. They would probably not have taken me in at all. The flareon, who just came back from an easy win against an electrike, tried to comfort me, but I wasn't listening. Even Agnes' gentle cuddling did nothing to lift my mood, and had I had the possibility to, I would have just walked out of the tournament and quit.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," a voice I knew said.

It was Ilma, who appeared seemingly out of nowhere. She and the doctor had joined the room, apparently to supervise the tournament, and the vapoleon had taken the opportunity of the break to come see me.

"I lost," I replied, as if that explained everything.

"So?"

"I'm worthless. I can't even win a fight."

Ilma sighed.

"Are you out of the tournament?"

"No, I'm in loser brackets. I'll just lose next match anyway."

She slapped me gently with her tail in the same gesture someone would make to wake up their drowsy friend.

"Then focus. You haven't lost yet. Think back about your match and see what you did wrong. I'm not going to give you advice this time - you're on your own - but don't let your loss get the best of you. Remember the pool? Why is your attitude different now?"

I looked away, peeking at Agnes as discreetly as I could. Ilma seemed to have noticed that.

"If you're afraid to disappoint Agnes or anyone else, then let me tell you right here: all we expect from you is that you do your best... and if you keep that attitude, then yes, you're going to disappoint us."

She turned around and went back to her trainer. I couldn't tell if she was actually angry or only pretending to be, but she had made a very good point. If I gave up now, I was certain I would disappoint everyone, but if I kept trying, there was a chance I could recover from my loss and snatch at least one win.

Putting my feelings aside, I thought back about the fight. My throwing trick had been successful twice - against the houndour, then in the tournament, and I could probably rely on it again, but past the first exchange, I had no idea what to do. It was obvious that I would not win a tug of war, since everyone was stronger than me, so I had to avoid direct confrontations and find a tricky way to push my opponent off the circle. It would probably be best for me to wait for an attack and react to it, as I had absolutely no idea what I should be doing to charge in. The more I thought about it, the more I regretted not agreeing to wrestling with Topa.

The director announced that the next round would begin shortly. I was facing another growlithe, who had lost to a zigzagoon, then won against a meowth. He greeted me politely as we were getting ready. Turning my head around, I realised that Ilma was watching, and my heart began racing. Turning back to my opponent, I focused as much as I could. I could not afford to lose this.

When the start signal was given, neither of us moved. I crouched slightly, ready to take a charge and trip my opponent, but he wasn't charging. I was completely thrown off by it - could it be that his strategy was also focused on defence? If so, what should I do? I had no idea how I should be attacking, and one of us had to do something or the match would be a stalemate. I needed to think of a way to counter a possibly defensive strategy. Would a feint work?

I stepped towards the growlithe slowly, but he didn't move, remaining calm and steady, waiting for me. As abruptly as I could, I hopped forward, tricking him into thinking I was charging. As expected, he crouched, ready to take the hit, but I stopped right before him and jumped in the air, expecting him to attack my legs. To my surprise, he attempted to punt me away, and I landed front paws first onto his head, crashing it against the floor. The growlithe, stunned, didn't react. He was far too low for me to trip him, but I remember what my first opponent did against me. Sliding my head between his legs, I pushed on my neck as hard as I could, flipping the growlithe over on his side. As he rolled to try to get back on his feet, I jumped on his

back, putting one of my paws against his head to keep it down, and putting as much weight as I could on the rest of his body. He struggled for a moment, before giving up after a few seconds.

"Congratulations, Ruby!" Agnes said, overjoyed.

It took me a moment to understand that I had won, and let go of the growl, apologising for the hits and for holding him longer than needed. He shook his head, saying that he was fine, and congratulated me for the win, hugging me briefly. Although he seemed a bit sad to have lost, he was nowhere near as upset as I was before, and went back to his trainer wagging his tail, hopping in excitement.

Agnes lifted me, euphoric, while the other trainer went on to report the result. Ilma was displaying a satisfied grin.

"You're awesome!" my human said, hugging me tightly. "You looked so upset after losing, I was so worried! See, you're doing well!"

I was happy that Agnes seemed to be satisfied, but I had the feeling that it was too soon to rejoice. Ilma's sentence worked both ways: I wasn't out of the tournament yet, and I had not won it either. It was too soon to give in to my feelings and I needed to remain focused. The vapoleon noticed my serious, focused attitude, and nodded in approval. She approached me, patting me on the head.

"See what focusing leads to? Don't lose control now. You'll have plenty of time to rejoice about your performance once the tournament is over."

"I'm surprised I won," I admitted. "I was going to focus solely on defence."

"You changed your strategy when you realised your previous one would not work," Ilma said. "That is very good. You are really intelligent, and quick thinking. When I said I thought you would go far, I did mean it."

I blushed. Did I deserve the compliments?

"Stay focused now, and think about your next fight. Don't relax yet."

I nodded. Going to check the brackets, I saw that my next opponent would be a poochyena. He had fought against three zigzagoon, losing the first match, then winning the next two. My body structure was completely different from that pokemon's, which could give me an advantage, but could also be an exploitable flaw. Zigzagoon had very short legs, which made it impossible to lift them from under their belly, but that was very possible with me and I needed to be careful. I didn't know much about poochyena, but its body structure was similar to growlithe's and mine. I needed to be careful not to be tricked the way I was in my first fight.

As we both walked into the circle and greeted each other, I smelled that my opponent was female, unlike the two growlithe. There was a chance that she would be physically weaker, but I still needed to assume she would be stronger than me. She was about as big as I, which meant she probably didn't have more range, but she might be faster than I was and I had no idea how heavy she would be. The growlithe I fought before was absurdly heavy and I barely managed to flip him over. This pokemon looked a little less bulky, and I was hoping she'd be lighter, but chances were she was still a lot heavier than me, and if she managed to get on top of me, I would be finished. She had light grey fur over her back and legs, but intense black fur on her paws and muzzle. Her eyes were sharp and a weirdly bright shade of yellow. Together with her visible fang, it gave her a permanently angry look, although the slow wagging of her short-furred tail and her small ears pointing upwards showed she wasn't angry at all. She looked a lot bulkier than me, especially her legs that were more than twice as large as mine. She'd certainly have more secure footing than I did.

She was a dark type. Did that mean that she'd be aggressive and try to take me on up front? If so, then a defensive strategy would be best, but I wasn't sure how she would attack. Fighting her directly might be possible, but I was at a disadvantage in that situation

because of the age difference. My best bet would be, again, to try to trick her.

The director gave the order to start the matches. As expected, the poochyena jumped directly at me. I stepped back to dodge it and tried to headbutt her front paws to trip her, but she seemed to expect it and jumped over me. I closely avoided her landing by rolling over, but she followed up too quickly and stepped on my paws, pinning them to the ground, before stepping over me with her front legs and putting her weight on my torso. She was lighter than the first growlithe, but still too heavy for me to do anything.

Noticing that her back legs were in front of me, I relaxed, then mustered as much strength as I could, swiping the floor violently with my entire lower body and tails. I successfully tripped her and she rolled over my hindquarters, accidentally hitting the base of my tails with her head. Groaning in pain, I tried to get up, but she had been faster and charged me head on, hitting me in the chest. I was forced to roll to the side and hurried to stand approximately and face her. That was what she wanted, and she jumped in, sliding under me, before lifting me on her shoulders and throwing me away. As I got back up, I noticed that I had been thrown outside of the circle. The poochyena stood near the edge, visibly proud of her victory. The tournament was over for me.

Chapter 28

Agnes came up to me to lift me and congratulate me on my performance while the other trainer went to report the result. As far as I could tell, her congratulations were genuine, but I didn't quite agree with them. On the one hand, I was extremely disappointed by my results, having lost so soon in the tournament, but on the other hand, I did get a win which I did not expect at all. Considering the reactions Pico, Derek, and Agnes had, they clearly did not expect it either, and I wasn't sure whether to feel proud of having surprised them or upset that they had so little confidence in me. Then again, I myself had no confidence in my victory at all, and I couldn't blame them.

As Agnes put me down on the floor with a large smile, Ilma approached from afar and I braced myself for a lecture, but instead, she came to me smiling.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"I lost," I replied as if that was a proper answer.

"I know that," she replied. "So, how are you doing?"

Her condescending attitude made my blood boil.

"I'm worth-"

Ilma slapped me with her tail before I could finish my sentence. It wasn't a gentle slap like before and was so strong it moved my head away, and I felt genuinely hurt - not physically, but emotionally - that she would hit me the way she did.

"Why did you hit me?"

"Is that the attitude you had? You just went in thinking you'd lose and didn't fight?"

"No!" I protested. "I tried. I'm... just too weak."

"Not as weak as you imagined. You did get a win. And don't you dare say it was luck, I will drown you."

I didn't reply, as that was exactly what I wanted to say, but maybe she was right. I probably shouldn't be so hard on myself, given my circumstances, and I had indeed done better than I expected. I wasn't too sure what to think of myself. Pico seemed to be proud of me, but he himself had not yet lost and had apparently crushed every one of his opponents. There was no doubt he would win the tournament, and how would I feel any good about myself when my only friend was going to win with ease?

Pico was soon called to continue his matches. Pokemon who were out of the tournament had the choice to either go home, or watch the matches provided the participants would not be in their pool, and Agnes decided to stay until the tournament was over to support her friend. Ilma didn't talk to me after we parted, but I had the feeling she wasn't actually angry at me, despite her slap and her threat.

His next fight was the winners quarterfinals. It was against a very big meowth, who had been counting on his physical strength to win. He tried to lift Pico, but failed, and the flareon simply pushed him out of the circle, making this an easy win. In losers, the poochyena I had lost to won against another poochyena, then lost to a growlithe, but I was not allowed to watch those fights as she might be in my pool. The loser brackets were conducted first, before the Winner Finals. The meowth lost to an electrike, and a houndour stomped a growlithe. The Losers Finals was electrike against houndour. After five minutes or more of constant back-and-forth, houndour managed to push the electrike outside of the circle.

Then came the Winner Finals. Pico was fighting an eevee, which was surprising absolutely everyone. Only houndour was not allowed to watch the fight, as he was the only one apart from these two to be still in the tournament. Lots of trainers had gone back home, upset of

their pokemon's defeat, but a few had stayed to watch the Winner Finals and Grand Finals.

Pico and the eevee entered the circle. I had never seen Pico - or any creature before - so focused. This eevee must have had something up her sleeve to have reached this point of the tournament. Everyone was pretty hype, but I was a bit worried for Pico. This match was supervised by the director and his absol themselves.

When the match started, Pico and the eevee just stood there facing each other, waiting for an attack. Pico was visibly physically stronger, but I wasn't sure it really mattered at this point. After a few seconds, he jumped onto eevee, who dodged the attack by jumping back, and retaliated. Pico dodged as well, tripping the eevee in the process, but she rolled and stood up instantly. Without waiting, Pico charged again and hit her in the flank. She took the hit and slapped him in the muzzle several times, stunning him for a moment, then hit his stomach with her head, making him fall on his side. The eevee knew she had no chance of holding him down, and attacked again to push him out of the circle. Pico blocked the attack with his four paws, then pushed the eevee away to have time to get up. For a few seconds, the two pokemon stared at each other, until the flareon charged again. This time, he stopped right before the eevee, hit her head with his, then slid it under her chest, forcing her to stand on two paws, then pushed forward. The eevee let herself fall on her back to avoid being pushed out of the circle, but Pico simply sat on her for the required ten seconds, winning.

There was a round of applause for Pico and a few people laughed at how he locked her down. He helped her stand up, and she just left without saying a word. Pico left as well, hiding in a corner to rest until the Grand Finals, where I laid by his side. My tails were too small to cover his body, but I tried anyway, and he thank me with a smile, extending one of his legs to cover his paw entirely under the smallness of my fluff. I didn't watch the losers finals, but there were shouts very soon after the director started the fight. Apparently, it

had been extremely short, and the eevee had simply stomped the houndour.

The grand finals weren't as interesting as the winner finals. The eevee, upset of her loss, and probably a bit scared to have been beaten that easily, attacked mindlessly, and Pico just lifted her and threw her outside of the ring in a very short time. That showed how important mindset was when fighting, which was what Ilma was trying to teach me, and I promised myself to do my best to have the best possible mindset all the time. Although proud of his victory, Pico made active efforts to remain humble, saying that his being evolved was the main reason for winning, because it gave him an unfair advantage over everyone else. He wasn't wrong, but I was hurt by his humility and how obnoxious I knew I had been after my victory, and I would have liked him to celebrate more than he did.

The people left were separated between those who came to congratulate Pico and Derek, ignoring me completely, and those who went to comfort eevee and her trainer. After a few minutes and a genuine friendly handshake between the finalists, everyone left.

Back at the mansion, I wasn't surprised to realise that Topa was nowhere to be found. Remembering the advice Ilma had given me, I decided it was time to try and see if she would allow me in the place she was currently hiding in. I was still worried about her, but most importantly, I felt like I really needed some company.

It didn't take me long to figure out where she was. Her pillow was covered in a very peculiar scent of sand and water. The door being closed, I wandered the manor searching for someone to open it for me, until I eventually sat in front of the stairs leading to the second floor and started yelping to call someone. After a short moment, Rakuen came to me, wearing her usual maid dress. She seemed worried.

"Are you alright, Ruby?" she asked as she walked down the stairs. "It's the first time you've ever done this."

I nodded. Standing on my back legs, I tugged lightly on her skirt to ask her to follow me, then froze in front of the stairs. I had yet to go down on my own, and what I remembered of my attempts was rather terrifying. The maid seemed to notice, and knelt next me with a gentle smile.

"Are you scared of the stairs? That's alright. Would you let me carry you?"

I secretly appreciated her asking for permission before touching me, which made me feel like she did have some level of respect, and nodded to accept. She carefully picked me up, making sure not to touch my belly, and carried me down the stairs before putting me down. I led her to the door and put a paw on it.

"You want to go outside? I'm not sure if you can. Let me ask."

She rushed back upstairs in direction of the rooms. A few minutes after, she came back and opened the door, saying that Agnes had given her permission, and I ran outside to go to the river.

As expected, Topa was laying on the grass, pawing lazily at the water. From afar, she looked so peaceful that it would have been impossible to know she was actually depressed. The fact that she didn't notice me coming, however, was giving away her actual state of mind.

"Oh, hello," she said when I walked up to her.

Although she was trying to sound normal, I could hear that her voice was less enthusiastic than usual. I laid down next her and sighed.

"You look tired," she noticed.

"Today was exhausting."

Remembering Ilma's advice, it would be best to act normally and continue talking to her about what was on my mind, pretending not to

know how depressed she was. It was probably a good way for me to prove that, despite her lying to me, I still loved and trusted her as much as before.

"Today was the start of pokemon classes," I continued. "We had a brawling tournament."

I explained the rules to her and described the fights, skimming over my mindset and not giving any details as to how I was feeling through it.

"What is your final rank?" she asked after I was done.

"I don't know. There will be pools tomorrow to determine a more precise ranking."

"Pools?"

"It's... a group where everyone fights one another."

"Oh, I see. Do you have an idea of what your rank would be?"

I remained silent to think. I passed first round thanks to the bye, but it wasn't really influential on the rank. After it, there were 32 pokemon in winners brackets, then 32 in losers. First round of losers brackets eliminated 16 pokemon, then I lost my first match, which sent me to the second round of 32 in losers. At that point, there were already 48 pokemon remaining from the tournament. I then won again, giving me access to the first round of 16 and eliminated another 16 pokemon, but I lost, which meant I and 7 others were eliminated. In total, I should probably place...

"Between 25 and 32, I think," I eventually said.

"How are you feeling about it?"

I took some time to think. Although I was guaranteed to be in the top half, I could possibly be halfway through the ranks, which meant that half of the entire class at done worse than me in the worst case. That

was significantly better than I even thought. How could my rank be so high if I lost so early in the tournament?

I looked at Topa, who was smiling lightly, and understood that this was exactly her point. From my description of the tournament, she knew that I was disappointed by my performance, and by having me do some basic math to estimate my rank, she made me realise that I had indeed done a lot better than I thought. Even when completely depressed herself, she was finding ways to make me feel better.

I was struck by a wave of guilt and looked away. She had been doing so much for me, and all I did in return was make her depressed and lonely.

"Is something on your mind?" she asked, noticing I was feeling down again.

Should I be honest? That would probably not help with her depression, but it was a great opportunity to try something. As Ilma said, there was no way anything I could say would make her feel better, so being honest wouldn't matter much here. It was probably too much of a risk. I should see if she herself was aware of her state of mind. Although I definitely shouldn't confess that I felt responsible for her state, this was my chance to let her know I had noticed something was off.

"Yes," I replied. "You've been acting weird lately. Is everything alright?"

She looked at me, surprised, and sighed.

"I have been feeling... sad. I am unsure why."

Was that a lie? Was she actually aware of why she was depressed, but not willing to admit it, or actually did not know? If so, would it be a good idea to tell her? Or should I help her figure it out on her own?

"Is that why you've been coming here?"

She nodded.

"I like water. I like its smell and I find the sound of water flowing to be very relaxing. We are lucky to have a river so close by."

I looked at the flowing water. So pristine clear that I could see the bottom of the river, it looked very shallow and probably wouldn't be an obstacle if any pokemon or animal wanted to get in. As both of us remained silent and my sensitive ears only picked up faint sounds of animals in the forest and some activity in the mansion, the sound of flowing water was almost overwhelming, but Topa was right: it was very soothing.

"This river takes its source from a lake near the White Hat," she continued. "We used to go there regularly until Agnes saved you. We have not been since because she wanted to make sure you were getting better."

"I'm sorry," I replied after a short hesitation.

She looked at me, seemingly surprised.

"For what? I wholeheartedly agree with her decision. Do not blame yourself for it."

"Well... it is my fault. But... Agnes actually talked to me. She wants to go to the lake now that I'm mostly healed."

"Oh."

There was a hint of excitement in her voice, but she didn't feel as enthusiastic as she should have been.

"When?"

"This weekend, I think."

"I look forward to that. You will see, the lake is a beautiful place. It is fairly remote, which means it is still fully natural and not visited by

anyone but us. I think Agnes' family has purchased the land to maintain it as well."

She took a moment to think.

"It also is not very far from the White Hat mountain. Maybe we can start investigating once we are there."

I frowned, unhappy. She was showing no signs of getting better and didn't seem to be open either. I should probably wait more before starting trying to make her feel better, and until then, I needed to give her the privacy she probably needed.

I stood up and stretched.

"You can stay, if you want," Topa suggested before I turned around.

I hesitated. It was clear from the way she spoke that she did want company, but would accepting be out of character for me? I had never been very close to her or showed any form of affection, but with this setting, I felt compelled to. The water running, the soft grass, and the enjoyable silence made for a very comfortable resting area, and I eventually gave in and walked towards her, laying down by her side before pushing myself into her flank. She covered me with her long tails and we stayed in that position until dinner, cuddling in silence.

The day after, pokemon classes did start in the morning. Pico and the eevee were greeted respectfully by everyone else, being the two strongest pokemon in the class, and I was surprised to notice that I seemed to have gathered a lot of respect as well. Ilma was probably right: everyone was probably impressed by my performance, myself included.

"Why are you here?" I asked Pico. "You don't have to participate in anything more, you already have your partner."

"Yes," he confirmed, "but Derek and the eevee's trainer wanted to talk and start getting to know each other. I am supposed to do the same, but she isn't very talkative to say the least."

He looked behind him. The eevee he faced in grand finals was sitting quietly by her trainer's legs and visibly had no intention to go to Pico and talk.

"I thought I could come watch your fights!" he said with enthusiasm after turning back to me.

"You're going to be disappointed," I replied, gloomy. "I'm bad."

He shook his head in reply.

"I'll only be disappointed if you keep having this mindset. Cheer up! You can do this."

To my disappointment, Ilma didn't seem to be around, and I couldn't stop myself from feeling somewhat betrayed by her absence. I didn't have time to linger on that, however, as the director came in the gym and started explaining how the day would go.

"Hi everyone," he greeted with a smile. "First of all, congratulations to the winner of the tournament and the runner-up. As explained yesterday, you are not obligated to attend today, so you are free to go whenever you want. For the others, we will be determining the accurate ranking of the class today."

He switched his computer on, which showed several square tables representing the different groups of pokemon.

"We will be doing so by having you all play in pools depending on when you were eliminated from the tournament. This gives two pools of 16, two of 8, two of 4 and two of 2. You will be fighting against every other pokemon in your pool, and once all matches are completed, your ranking in your pool will determine your global ranking based on what tie your pool is for. For example, for someone

eliminated in loser quarterfinals - that is, the second pool of 4 - the pool is tied for 9th place. The one who places first in the pools, will be 9th globally, the one who places second 10th, and so on until the one who places last, who will be 16th, and then the next ranks will be determined by the next pool who is tied for 17th. Is that clear for everyone?"

It took a bit of time, but everyone replied positively. If my calculations were right, then my tie would be for 25th place.

"Once the rankings are fully determined, you will be split in eight tiers of eight pokemon. I will give you the full details tomorrow. Class is compulsory tomorrow at 10am, but that will only be to give the results and explain what will we be doing from now on. Other than that, tomorrow is an off day."

The audience cheered quietly, as expected. A break wouldn't hurt me, either - I wanted to try and spend more time with Topa.

"For the pools today, I trust you can organise yourselves on your own. The tournament yesterday went amazingly well and I am very pleasantly surprised. Just be aware that because of the number of matches in the two pools of 16, we will split them in two with a break around noon. All other pools should be finished by then. When your pool is finished and the results reported, you are free to go home."

The trainers and pokemon involved in the pools of 16 pokemon protested, unhappy to have to stay all day.

"Rules are the same as yesterday. I'll be here entering the results. Split up, now, and get started!"

The pokemon in my pool were two growlithe, two zigzagoon, two poochyena and one houndour. They treated me with a lot more respect than I felt I deserved. I was in this pool only because I avoided a fight by receiving a bye, and I probably would have lost sooner than I did without it. Looking at Pico discreetly, I made myself

a promise to be in the upper half of my pool to prove that I deserved my rank and that the bye had not been unfairly given.

After some time during which trainers were agreeing on the order of the fights, everyone gathered to the same place to affect the pokemon to their first opponent. Luckily for me, my first fight was against a zigzagoon. I couldn't stop staring at the houndour, who made me nervous. She was to fight a growlithe, but I knew that I would eventually have to fight her and that was terrifying to me.

We were given a bit of time to get ready, which I spent talking to Pico who was trying to calm me down. I was very uncomfortable, and worried: I had never fought against a zigzagoon before. Their legs were very short, which meant that I wouldn't be able to sneak my muzzle under their belly to lift them and push them out. The one I was facing, however, looked frail, and probably wasn't much stronger than me, and she seemed to be very clumsy. I decided to try to fight head-on and make it a duel of mights instead of a duel of wits.

When the start signal was given, she charged at me directly, seemingly without any particular plan. I stepped aside to dodge, and she attempted to abruptly change directions to face me but tripped. I took the chance to charge as well, hitting her in the flank to force her on her back, then got on top of her to hold her down. I managed to hold her for ten seconds, making it an easy win for me.

The zigzagoon congratulated me, apparently not upset to have lost at all, and I returned to Pico, who was silent. He had told me that he didn't want to talk too much while the pools were running, as he didn't want to give me advice which would be an unfair advantage. I didn't mind, but I was hoping for some form of congratulations that I didn't receive. A bit annoyed, I went back to my circle to face my next opponent: a male poochyena.

He was very beefy, and would probably rely on his raw strength to overwhelm me. I would have to be smart if I wanted to win, but if I was correct, then I could likely use his strength against him. As expected, when the start signal was given, he charged at me without

waiting, and I repeated my throwing trick that worked against the houndour and others during the tournament, throwing him behind me. Unfortunately, he was far too heavy for it to be effective, and he had no trouble turning around and pounding me. My side felt like it was breaking as I flew, and I had to dig my claws as deep as I could to prevent myself from sliding out of the circle. I was, at that point, on my belly, claws in the ground, in a vulnerable position right at the edge. The poochyena, certain of his victory, ran at me with all his might, and I waited until the very last moment to roll to the side, effectively dodging the attack. My opponent was unable to stop in time and ran himself out of the circle, losing the fight. Pico was still laughing when I came to him, and congratulated me on the intelligent move. The poochyena, however, seemed very grumpy and refused to talk to me, obviously upset. His reaction made me remorseful for humiliating him like that, but I quickly chased that away to focus.

When my next opponent was called, I noticed Agnes had become nervous and I didn't understand why. It didn't take me long to understand it: in the circle, waiting patiently, was the only houndour of the group. Suddenly extremely nervous, I stepped in the circle as well. She looked angry and menacing, and although she talked to me with a soft voice, I wasn't reassured at all. After a minute of hesitation, Agnes finally told us to start the match.

The houndour and I circled around the area, like predators about to fight for a prey. I was so nervous I thought my heart would explode. The houndour had lost any of the friendliness she used to have and was now a cold, bloodthirsty killing machine, and I was her next meal. After what felt like whole minutes of silent staring, she jumped at me.

I froze. Too terrified to do anything, she landed paws first on me, knocking me over on my side. She then put a leg on my head, forcing it onto the ground, and attempted to climb on me. Just like the houndour that tried to kill me, she was going to bite my neck, and once I admitted defeat, she would turn me around and make quick work of me by slashing my throat open.

I started struggling not for the match, but in a fit of panic, and whining loudly. The houndour, surprised, let go of her hold on me, and I crawled away, running towards Pico to be protected.

Chapter 29

Having seen the situation, the flareon wasn't sure what to do. He covered me with his immense tail, giving me a sense of security, and the houndour I was fighting crept closer, trying to sniff at me. Pico didn't let her approach, but there was no anger in his movements. He was simply trying to protect the tiny shivering vulpix hiding in his tail.

Agnes quickly came to me and picked me up, hugging me tightly and patting my back, whispering comforting words. After a few minutes, she managed to calm me down, and I looked around as if I was just waking up. Seeing the houndour, then the circle on the floor, I realized what the situation was and let out a deep sigh. Forcing myself to stop shaking and requested to be put on the floor.

Noticing I seemed to be calmed down, she accepted, and put me on the floor right next to her leg. The houndour was staying at a safe distance, scared of the flareon guarding me and not sure what she should do. As worried and kind as she looked, she still looked menacing to me, but I slowly took steps forward, trying to sniff at her to reassure myself. Her scent had no traces of anger or threat, but she smelled worried, and she herself stepped back if I got too close, her tail between her legs, looking at Agnes with guilty eyes. As I tried to slowly get closer to keep control of myself and get over my fear, she stepped back, not willing to let me touch her for fear of retaliation. Both our trainers were staying close, ready to intervene. After a few seconds, I gathered my spirits and stepped forward, still staring at the floor, before taking a deep breath and briefly licking her nose.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I... I don't know what happened."

"Are you alright?" the houndour asked, sniffing the top of my head now that she was confident I wouldn't attack her.

I passed a paw above my head like a cat cleaning their ears to push her muzzle away.

"I'll be fine. I... I got scared, that's all."

She stared at me for a moment, dubious.

"Do you want to redo the match? That... wasn't a deserved victory."

I shook my head.

"I lost. I shouldn't have panicked. Even if you feel like you don't deserve your victory, I definitely deserve my loss."

I bowed shortly before returning to Agnes.

"Are you going to be fine?" she asked.

I nodded. My heart was still racing, but I wasn't scared anymore.

She looked at her opponent, who shook her head and went on to report the result. Annoyed at myself, I sat down next to Pico, deeply ashamed.

"Are you alright?" he asked, still worried.

"Yeah," I replied, trying to hide my irritation. "I just... panicked."

Pico emitted a grunting sound I was unable to decipher and just rolled his fluffy tail over me, saying that I needed to calm down and focus on my next matches. I appreciated his pragmatism and his focus on the ongoing tournament, which helped me focus myself, but I was scared of Ilma hearing about this incident and what she would say to me.

I took some time to assess the situation. My standing was, at the time, two wins and one loss. Although winning the pool seemed pretty much impossible, it was still very feasible to be in the top half as I promised myself. Trainers around the pool agreed to give me a

longer break than usual to give me time to get myself together, and I didn't waste the opportunity. Comfortably set in Pico's fluffy tail, I breathed slowly, focusing on the tournament, doing my best to calm down, wrapped in the flareon's protective scent. Agnes regularly petted me on the head, and this elongated rest proved very effective at calming me down. When I was called to resume fighting, I was very calm, and fully concentrated.

My next opponent was a growlithe. I had no idea how he was doing in the standings, but he was standing in a very forward stance, full of confidence. Assuming he was going to try to attack first, I decided to go for a very aggressive strategy myself, expecting his defence to be weak.

When our trainers gave us the go, he hopped forward as if to jump on me, but actually stopped before, probably expecting a defensive movement from me which he would then easily counter. Unfortunately for him, I was preparing a full-on charge, and hit the centre of his belly with my head, making him fall on his side with a whine. Relentless, I took a step back and charged again right into him. He managed to stop my charge with all four of his legs, but that made it very easy for me to simply push him out of the ring. Standing up from his position, he congratulated me and insisted that my headbutt hadn't hurt him.

The next match, a few minutes after, was against the second growlithe in the pool - a female. She looked bulkier than the other growlithe I fought before, so a straight fight would probably be disadvantageous to me. However, she would likely expect me to think that way, and I thought I could try being sneaky and fight her directly.

As soon as the start signal was given, we both jumped forward and crashed into each other in a very comical way. We both staggered back, effectively resetting the match, and when we recovered from the stuns, she attempted to jump at me again. Surprised, I reflexively crouched to dodge, letting her land behind me, before turning around quickly, still laying on my belly. Seeing an opportunity, she jumped

again, but I was expecting it. Stretching myself backwards, she landed right before me, stepping on my front paws, and I unleashed the full spring power of my spine, hitting her shoulder with my head. She tripped on my paw, falling to her side, and I climbed on top of her, putting weight on her paws and hindquarters to stop her from standing up. After ten seconds, I released her, and was congratulated for my victory.

I was now proudly standing at four victories and one defeat, with only two matches left. Even if I lost the next two matches, I would be in the top half of my pool, fulfilling the promise I made myself. Looking at Pico, not expecting him to say anything, I enjoyed the wide eyes with which he was looking at me. I myself was just as surprised, if not more, but I needed to focus and try to get third or even second place.

My next opponent was a frail-looking zigzagoon. When the start signal was given, she charged at me, and I simply tanked the hit, thinking I would be able to trip her. However, her charge barely moved me at all, and I realised that I was a lot stronger than she was. I pushed my head up against her, forcing her to push hers downwards, before swiftly moving my head out of the way. She tumbled forward as a result, and I grabbed her by the excess skin of her neck and pushed her outside of the ring as she was struggling to get out of my grasp.

For the last match, I was facing the currently undefeated leader of the pool, a large female poochyena. Trainers agreed to have our match be the last in the pool and give me a bit more rest than others, and I was secretly thankful for it. I just waited, laying by Pico, looking nervously at the standings screen. After a few minutes, I realised that the houndour I was scared of had lost all three of her recent matches, which meant that I would be guaranteed second place if I lost the match, and tied for first place if I won.

I didn't have much time to reflect on that, as I was called to our arena to start the final fight of our pool. All other pokemon and trainers had gathered around, which made me nervous. They all knew what the

current standings were, and this was a match between the two highest placed pokemon in the pool. They were all probably expecting something amazing, and I was afraid I would disappoint them. Pico not saying anything didn't help, as I would have hoped he'd at least try to calm me down, and when I stepped into the ring, my heart was already racing more than it had been the whole day.

I was completely out of focus when the start signal was given, and the poochyena charged me. I came back to reality barely in time to clumsily crouch the attack, being forced back a bit. My opponent pushed my head down and grabbed the fur on my neck, the same way I had just done to the zigzaggon. I threw myself to the side, freeing my neck of her grasp and rolling back on my feet. I could feel my skin burn as her teeth left a dent inside of it, and simply grimaced to try to absorb the pain and keep focusing.

It was obvious that I would not win in a direct fight. She was, again, significantly stronger than me, and I needed to find a way to trick her into coming close to the edge, then charge at her, or I would certainly be losing. If she successfully climbed on top of me, I knew I would be unable to fight her off.

She charged at me again, confident in her strength. I jumped in place as high as I could, successfully dodging her attack and landing on her hindquarters, forcing them down. Before she could get up, I climbed on top of her and attempted to keep her on the ground, but she threw me off with ease. Before I could stand up, she ran into me and pushed me out of the circle.

I sighed, slightly upset. The poochyena, panting, came to me to help me up, and I half-heartedly accepted her help. Although I had lost, I was still feeling satisfied with the fight, and gave her genuine congratulations for her win and undefeated record.

"Thank you," she replied with an equally genuine smile.

She peeked at my back, noticing a slight dent in the fur and some blood.

"Are you hurt?"

"Nothing serious," I replied. "Your fangs grazed my back when I rolled to get free."

My side was still painful from her final charge, but I did my best to hide it. Although she didn't look convinced, she didn't insist and simply congratulated me for my performance, before going back to her trainer gleaming with pride.

Pico joined me from behind and licked my cheek by surprise. I jolted, jumping forward like a scared cat, which was apparently very amusing to him, as he started laughing.

"That's not funny," I pouted, unhappy to have been sneaked up on.

"I find it funny," he replied, still laughing. "So, how are you?"

"I'm tired. I'm not hurt though."

"That wasn't what I was asking."

He jumped around me, visibly excited, which annoyed me slightly. He was waiting for something but I had no idea what.

"What?" I barked, pissed.

He stopped jumping, surprised by my grim attitude.

"Aren't you proud?"

"Of what?"

"Your results!"

I stood puzzled for a second before realising what he was so excited about.

I had done well.

I didn't just get lucky with a bye following my aggression. I had competed in the tournament and won a round. Even after losing, I had been among the best of my pool, scoring second. My global rank was 26.

I hesitated. I wasn't quite sure how to react. Pico seemed to be unable to contain his excitement, but I didn't feel all that enthusiastic. I remembered Topa's calm mathematical analysis of it, and I felt like my final result, albeit surprising, wasn't something to be proud of.

Pico sat down.

"You don't seem very proud of yourself," he noticed.

"Should I be? I'm... not sure."

I looked around. While a few pokémon were still fighting, the top half of the class was already done and the only ones remaining were the larger pools, who would get a break soon. A lot of the pokémon felt like they were dragging their body behind their trainer's. Some were proud of themselves and showing it, but some were more reserved. Some trainers were talking to one another, their pokémon playing or resting, and I could notice Agnes, Derek, my pool's winner and her trainer, all talking with the director while he occasionally registered the result of a match a trainer came to give. The whole place, despite the agitation, was very silent, and I felt like I was in a different world. Overall, the entire building was coated in a strangely gloomy mood.

"I mean, I'm pretty happy with my results, all things considered," I conceded. "But..."

I shook my head, unable to put my thoughts into words. Pico looked at me expectantly, but didn't seem to know what to say either. Before I could sort it out, the poochyena I had fought last came back to me with our human. She was still looking very happy, and she came to me with joy:

"Hi again! It turns out that we'll be a pair this year!"

"A pair?"

"For lessons. Remember that the director said we'd get paired with someone else?"

I reached back into my mind, vaguely remembering something about it, but I couldn't find any precise information. I hadn't been paying much attention.

"Well, the pairs go like this. First and second pair together..."

She peeked at Pico, who was still staring at me and didn't seem to notice her at all.

"Third and fourth together, and so on. Now... I'm ranked 25, and you 26, so that means we'll be with each other!"

She looked very enthusiastic and I had no idea why. I clumsily replied, feeling a little overwhelmed by the outgoing pokemon.

"That's pretty cool, heh..."

She nodded, completely oblivious as to what my actual mood was.

"My name is Flick!"

"I'm Ruby," I replied, reluctant.

"I know," she said. "You're pretty famous in here."

I froze.

"What? Why?"

She looked at me as if I had just fallen from the moon.

"How can you not be? You're the only vulpix here, and you've made quite the impression when that houndour attacked you."

"An impression how?"

"You're so young and yet so strong! You've impressed more than your flareon friend, I'm telling you."

I wasn't sure how to react. If she was not lying, then I had a good reputation, despite what happened to me. If I read through her words right, few pokemon were actually aware of my belly wound, and I was only famous because of my age. I felt like it would be too risky to ask her directly and decided to simply keep that assumption. It would probably make interacting with others a lot easier.

"If it makes you feel better," she added, thinking I was unsatisfied with her answer, "you've definitely impressed me. I didn't expect you to be this strong and this quick. You're even faster than me! I look forward to learning more with you."

I stared at her. Her eyes were still shining from her victory, and she looked genuinely happy to have been paired with me.

My eyes got lost upon Agnes and I suddenly felt unbearably sad, although I wasn't able to explain why. I just turned my head away from her, silently shaking the feeling away.

"Me too," I replied with no enthusiasm whatsoever.

Pico was still sitting behind me, keeping an eye on us. Seeing him reminded me of Pride, who said he wanted to teach me to use my psychic powers, but we still had not done any of that. When were we supposed to start?

What about Topa? Would it be a good time to start trying to get her to talk? She was probably going to question me about my final result and discuss it, so I would probably not have the chance to talk to her

about her depression at all. Maybe it would actually be best to wait until after we returned from the mountain trip.

Agnes came to pick me up shortly after, saying we were going back the mansion. The day after would be a day off, and I would have plenty of time to plan how to talk to the ninetales.

As expected, when we went back, I immediately went to the river to find Topa laying there. She looked drowsy and took time to notice me, but smiled as soon as she did. I gave her my result, and she looked surprised.

"26? That is quite amazing. Congratulations."

"Thanks," I replied, laying next to her.

"How are you feeling about it?"

I thought back about the answer I gave Pico, and how sad other pokemon looked to have lost. Despite their loss, a lot of them were still talking with one another and were doing well. I seemed to be the only one who had taken their losses so harshly.

"I feel kind of bad," I admitted after a few minutes.

"Oh? Why?"

"I was..."

I hesitated.

"All other pokemon all looked so sad, but... well, not sad. Just disappointed. It was just me who was sad. No one seemed to care about losing. They were just having fun. When I won against someone, they genuinely congratulated me, but I had a hard time doing that myself."

"Are you feeling like you do not deserve your rank because of that?"

I pondered.

"No," I eventually answered with conviction. "When the pool started, I did think I didn't deserve to be where I was. I promised myself to be in the top half of it, and I ended up second. No, I did way better than I imagined I would do. I don't think my rank is undeserved."

I marked a pause again. Pico's cold attitude during the tournament was coming back to me, and I remembered how much his behaviour changed after the pool was finished.

"I'm... ashamed," I ended up conceding, lowering my ears.

Topa waited a moment for me to continue, but I wasn't quite sure what to say again.

"How come?" she asked. "There is no shame in winning or losing."

"No, not that," I hastily replied. "It's... my attitude. I'm..."

I chuckled nervously, the corner of my eyes becoming wet as my muzzle began shaking.

"I'm such a kid. Everyone there was having fun. It didn't matter who won or who lost, they were just happy to participate. But I was just... so focused on my results. I didn't even take the time to enjoy the tournament."

I repressed a tear. I didn't need Topa to be more worried about me.

"I didn't have fun," I whispered.

Topa stared at me for a few seconds, lost for words. She eventually stood up, laid right next to me, and wrapped her magnificent tails around me.

"I will be honest," she whispered after a long wait. "I do not know what to say."

My ears jolted back up in surprise. It was the first time Topa was unable to find the right words to cheer me up.

"I will just give you one piece of advice, if I may," she continued.

"Sure."

She licked the top of my head.

"Just have fun in the future."

I sighed, putting my head on her laid paws. We stood there in silence, enjoying the whispers of water running and wind going through trees. I apparently was dozing off, as when Topa started talking again, I jolted right awake:

"When you were human, were you a student?"

I blinked a few times, confused by the question.

"Yes."

"Can you describe how it was to me?"

I took some time to mull it over. My human memories were still vivid, but I had never taken time to properly think about how college was.

"Stressful. Everyone was so preoccupied by exams. Everything was about exams. And they were really hard. People went as far as to cheat so they'd get better grades."

Topa shook her head in disapproval.

"You should not blame yourself for the attitude you had, then," she said. "Blame the system you were in. They only ever taught you about results. That is why, when you were set in a similar context, you only ever cared about results."

She looked at me and smiled.

"Results are not as important as you think. You are not at school to be judged. You are at school to better yourself. I doubt anyone genuinely cares about how good you are, either. It is all about how much of yourself you are willing to give."

"Why were they ranking us, then?"

"Formalities, I would assume. I do not think that the actual point of the tournament was to see who is number what. I would rather think that they were looking at how everyone was affected by their performance, and how much effort they poured into it."

She poked me with her muzzle.

"How much effort do you think you made?"

"I did my best," I replied with confidence.

That wasn't even a lie - I did actually do my best, apart from the incident with the houndour.

"That is good," she approved. "However... I will bet that you only did your best so that you would have a rank that you were not disappointed in."

I looked away, embarrassed to have been read so easily.

"Correct," I conceded.

To my surprise, she was still smiling. I expected her to be angry at me.

"Keep doing your best, then. But do your best for another reason. Enjoy the time you will be spending there learning. Worry not about your performance, or about what you think others expect of you. And worry not about what you expect of yourself."

"What if I don't do well? What if I'm disappointment?"

"Ruby," she said, removing her tails from my body. "You would only be a disappointment if you stopped trying. Just do your best, that is all that matters."

Chapter 30

The day after was a Thursday, and a day off for me following the tournament. Exhausted from the two days of intense physical activity, I was hoping to sleep in, but Agnes woke me up only slightly later than usual.

"We're going to school!" she announced with a smile.

I emitted a quiet, sleepy whine.

"We're going to meet Faith and Flick. Since we're going to be together the whole year, I thought it would be a good idea to get to know each other."

Faith? That was probably the trainer's name. I did remember Flick, but I wasn't too enthusiastic about meeting her. She was a little too outgoing for me and I had nothing to tell her anyway.

I whined again, trying to convince Agnes to drop the idea, but she wasn't willing to listen. She carried me downstairs and told me to eat well. I didn't understand how she was so full of energy so early in the morning, and how the perspective of meeting someone for several hours could be so exciting for her, but I didn't have a choice and had to follow.

I spent the entire car ride lazily staring out the window, wondering what I was going to be forced to do. I was still somewhat sleepy and I definitely didn't look forward to seeing the poochyena again. I didn't dislike her, but I felt like the school was forcing me to befriend her, which wasn't how I thought friendships worked. I wouldn't mind studying or working with her, but she definitely shouldn't expect me to be friendly. I wasn't exactly ready yet - I didn't even trust Pico completely, and I had been introduced to him a lot more, and in a less forced way. The only one I would have called friend at school

was Ilma, and I wasn't sure what she considered me to be. Maybe accepting Flick as a friend wasn't such a bad idea after all...

It was around 10am, according to Agnes, when we arrived at school. She went to her locker and came back shortly after, wearing a sports bra and shorts, and having tied her hair in a ponytail. I lowered my ears and tail, understanding that the day I thought was going to be a chance to rest would just end up in more effort being made. Flick and her trainer joined us shortly after, and Faith was wearing a similar outfit.

The poochyena came up to me wagging her tail, but I pushed her off as she leaned in to say hello. Canting her head to the side for a short moment, she simply jumped in place and yelped happily to greet me, not trying to touch me anymore.

"Sorry," I said, feeling like I needed to justify my rebuttal. "I'm not one for physical contact. Also, you're... a little too outgoing for me."

"That's alright," she replied, still smiling. "I'll be less invasive in the future."

"Thanks."

I peeked at Agnes and Faith, who were just discussing.

"What are we going to do?" I asked, turning back to my new partner.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Probably just some running. Maybe we'll get to play."

I turned my head away so she wouldn't see me grimace. She was way too enthusiastic and outgoing for me. I somehow managed to refrain from answering "I hope not" and yawned widely as I turned back to her.

"I'm too tired to run."

She tilted her head to the side.

"What?" I inquired.

"Why tired? You had a whole night to sleep."

"That wasn't enough. I'm not..."

I wasn't too sure what to say. I knew my body wasn't adult and needed more sleep than Flick probably did, but was she aware of it?

"I'm young," I eventually continued. "I need more sleep than you."

Her eyes widened as if she just realised something.

"Oh. That's why."

She bent over, seemingly excited. Her tail was wagging so much I wondered how it wasn't already tired.

"It's alright! We can take breaks. Just bark if you feel too tired."

I looked up at Agnes, imploring to be taken away from this ominously positive pokemon. Peeking at me, she noticed my stare, but simply petted me believing I was asking for attention.

I wouldn't have the patience to deal with Flick. There was such a massive difference between how she behaved while fighting and how she was outside of a fight that I felt like I was talking to the wrong pokemon. The best way I'd have to deal with her would be to force her into her more serious side, which meant lots of fighting and training. Or playing, but I wasn't sure what kind of games we could play, apart from brawling.

"Okay," Agnes eventually said, turning to us. "Are you two ready?"

Flick nodded vigorously and I gave a single, shy nod.

"Alright. Let's go then."

They started jogging and the poochyena and I followed behind our respective trainer. While Agnes and Faith were occasionally speaking, we didn't say a single word through the entire jog. We went to the forest where I had spoken to Pride, then around the police station, going in a circuit that we repeated several times, taking a short break every lap. I could keep up in speed very easily, being a fox while the poochyena was more of a dog, and of course the two humans were significantly slower than we were. To my surprise, however, I could also easily keep up in stamina, and I was the least tired of us four at the end of the running.

When we finally stopped for good, panting, I looked at Flick, wondering what the point of this whole thing was. We could have just jogged on our own, without Faith and her pokemon. And we could have done so in the forest around the mansion. Why insist on coming to school?

"Well," Flick said, turning to me. "It was nice running with you! We're going back home to eat, now."

"Same," I replied. "Have a nice afternoon."

"You too!"

She turned around, still wagging her tail, and she and her human left after bidding us goodbye. I remained in place, puzzled, secretly relieved to be rid of that overwhelming pokemon.

"I'm disappointed," Agnes frowned, turning to me. "You didn't make any effort to befriend her. You two didn't say a word when running."

She was staring at me, visibly unhappy. I lowered my ears and tail and looked away in guilt.

"I was hoping you'd get to know each other. What's wrong?"

She knelt, still looking disappointed, but didn't seem to be angry. I wasn't sure how to convey my unease regarding the poochyena and

stomped in place awkwardly.

"You'll get to like her eventually, I suppose. She's very outgoing, I'll give you that. It can't hurt you to meet other pokemon. You can't stay hidden in the mansion all the time."

She stretched, yawning casually.

"Right, I'm hungry. Where is he..."

Shortly after she said that, I smelled an odour I immediately recognized. Pride and his trainer were walking towards us.

"Ah, there," Agnes commented with a smile.

When they reached us, Sean greeted me casually, but the espeon kept his noble, almost haughty attitude, and simply threw a cold "hi" at me. I didn't get flustered, as it seemed to be his way to respect my privacy, but I was disappointed he wasn't being a little friendlier towards me. I returned a somewhat enthusiastic yet tired "hello" and he smiled.

"Pride," Agnes said, turning to him. "I'll leave her to you now. We'll be back in a couple hours."

He nodded, and I stared at him, confused. He seemed to notice, as he smiled at me and stood up from his sitting position.

"Come with me!"

Agnes and Sean waved us goodbye as they walked towards the cafeteria, and I simply followed the espeon into the forest, in the exact spot where we had first talked.

"What are we doing here?" I asked.

"Don't you remember? Psychic powers. I was supposed to meet with you every day, but with the tournament, we figured it would be best

to let you focus on that. Tournament is over now, so we can get started."

I knew I should have been more enthusiastic about it, especially given how excited I was when I first heard I might have psychic powers, but I didn't feel too excited this time. Pride had no trouble picking that up:

"You don't seem too interested."

"Sorry, I'm..."

What could I say? I had no idea what exactly was going on in my head. I felt a bit absent, as if I weren't exactly awake.

"It doesn't matter," he eventually said. "You can focus on this for now, and go back to what is bothering you later. If anything, a break from it would do you good, right?"

He was smiling at me - a very comforting, almost father-like smile. I stared at him for a few seconds, surprised. I wouldn't have expected him to have the slightest bit of worry for me.

"Okay," I replied.

"How many moves do you know?" he asked.

I hesitated, feeling ashamed of the answer I had to give. Was it normal for a vulpix my age to only know one? What if he started questioning me about my life as a wild vulpix? I obviously couldn't lie, since it wouldn't take much effort for him to figure that out.

"One," I eventually answered, looking away.

"Oh. Well, you're really young, so that was to be expected. This is going to make it a bit harder for you to learn, though. Have you experimented with other types of energies yet?"

"What do you mean?"

"I assume the only move you currently know is Ember, right? So you're only familiar with fire-type energy."

"Oh. I... I haven't."

He looked at me, his face distorted in a weird surprised movement.

"Well, that is surprising. But it's alright."

He looked around and grabbed a single pebble, which he dropped in front of me.

"We're going to use this for practising."

He took a deep breath, as if he were preparing for a long speech.

"Essentially... Well, there are three components to learning telekinesis. First one would be summoning the right kind of energy. Second one would be summoning it outside of your body, and third one directing it towards your target. Keep in mind that this is more general than just telekinesis, there are a lot of moves that work that way. In fact, I'd say that most moves work that way. Moves that you generate inside of you then hurl are fairly rare."

He paused, waiting to see if I understood everything. I nodded, taking notes to myself. I wasn't sure how much of that I was supposed to already know, but if he was explaining everything, it was probably safe to assume that I wasn't supposed to be aware of any of it, and that pokemon learnt about their powers from being explained by their parents.

"We'll start with the generic one - the second aspect. It's going to be useful for you to learn new moves more easily. I'm not very knowledgeable on fire-type moves, but you can probably ask Pico or your ninetales friend for a list."

"Topa," I said.

"Topa," he repeated. "Sorry."

There was a moment of silence. Pride was looking at me expectantly.

"Can you at least show me?" I eventually asked.

"Okay."

He took a few steps back and casually glanced at the pebble. It was almost immediately surrounded by a faint light blue halo and lifted off the ground. Pride made it levitate around me slowly, giving me time to try to bathe in the energy the stone was emanating. A quick peek at him showed me that his eyes were glowing the same way, which gave him a very peculiar intimidating visage.

The pebble dropped back to its starting point and the espeon's eyes returned to normal.

"Did you feel the energy?" he asked.

"No," I bluntly said. "I was... This reminds me of Will-O-Wisp."

Pride smiled.

"That's why a lot of people think it's a psychic-type move. Well, we'll work on the energy later. For now, you need to learn to project energy outside of your body."

"How do I do that?"

"Can you show me your Ember?"

I hesitated, but eventually agreed. I fired an unpower Ember at a random tree.

"That was fast," Pride said, visibly surprised. "You're good at this."

I didn't know if he was genuinely complimenting me, or just being kind and opted not to reply.

"That was too fast, actually," he continued. "When you learnt Ember, you were told to do something with your energy, right? I'm not sure how fire-types work, to be honest."

I took time to dig back into my memories.

"The inner flame," I said.

"What is that?"

"It's, huh... source of my powers. It's like a fire burning next to my heart. It's what controls whether or not we use real fire or not."

"I see. I have nothing of the sort - I wonder if all fire-type pokemon have it. It might be the key to controlling energies, then. I think we'll need to ask Pico. Or Topa."

I took some time to think back about what Topa said. She did say that my fire powers came from it, but didn't mention anything about other energies.

"I don't know," I admitted.

"It's alright. That's a question for later. So, try to focus on what happens when you create an Ember in your mouth."

I obeyed, laughing silently, amused at the reversed situation. When Topa trained me to throw Embers, she had me do the same, but it was to learn to do it faster - and now I was supposed to do it slowly.

I took time to summon energy into my mouth, before twirling it into a fireball and throwing it away.

"Did you feel the energy you were creating?" Pride asked.

"Yes."

"Did it come from your inner flame?"

"No. Real fire would, though."

He smiled.

"Good. Now, you need to practise summoning that energy outside of your body."

"How do I do that?"

"You... just do it."

He looked genuinely confused, the same way Topa was unable to describe to me how to breathe fire. It was probably something I needed to experiment with and figure out myself.

"Just try it!" Pride said, trying to be supportive, seeing that I was hesitating.

I sighed. Focusing harder on how exactly I was summoning energy, I fired a few more Ember at random locations, trying to understand the process I was going through to summon energy. Pride was simply watching me, not saying a word.

It took me several minutes to realise that the energy I was creating seemed to appear right next to my inner flame. I still had no idea how I was doing it, but I was summoning it inside of my body, then moving it into my muzzle, before rolling it into a ball as Topa instructed me, and shooting it. This entire process took a fraction of a second and I was able to shoot Ember almost instantly if I wanted to. I probably needed to have a better understanding of the energy itself before I would be able to do anything outside my body, or even unrelated to fire.

I abruptly remembered what Topa mentioned when she explained how my powers worked. She said that my body was surrounded by unfire energy, which was what gave me weakness to some other types of unpowers. I didn't remember everything she said about it, but she mentioned it was what enabled me to fight - until that energy

was depleted. Back then, I had failed to detect that energy, but would I be able to now? And would I be able to use it?

I closed my eyes, focusing intensely on my body, trying to remember to the best of my ability what my own Ember felt like when I fired them. I remembered clearly how Topa's Ember felt when they flew past my head when she was teaching me how to use my powers. I quickly realised that the feeling was lingering and actually extended across my entire body, but no matter how hard I tried, I was unable to control it. Unlike my inner flame, the size of which I could control to some extent, I had absolutely no power over this aura that surrounded me.

I grunted, dissatisfied.

"What's wrong?" Pride asked, still watching me.

"I can't do it," I frowned.

"It does take some practice. Pico or Topa can probably help you with it."

"Is it really going to help me though?"

Pride looked confused.

"Of course. How else would you levitate anything? You need to direct your energy at the item you want to lift."

"Okay."

I kept trying to control the energy outside of my body, but I was completely unable to. After some time, Pride invited me to go back to the school's main building, as Agnes and Sean were probably done eating. I followed, unhappy with my performance, but determined to figure out how to generate energy outside of my body. I thanked Pride for his advice and we agreed to meet again on Monday to see my improvement.

Back home, I found Topa sleeping in the living room, on the tiny wobbly couch that she said she didn't like. Rakuen was cleaning around her, trying not to wake her up, and didn't notice me as I peeked. Unwilling to disturb anyone, I went alone to the training room to try to practice more.

As the lights flicked on when I entered the room, I was overwhelmed by a strong desire to cry. Before I could even think about resisting, I was standing alone at the door, staring at an empty room and crying. I stayed there for several minutes, secretly hoping that no one would come by and see me. The lights had time to switch off before I was done, and I didn't move for several minutes after I managed to stop.

I was unspeakably lonely. Not that there was no one I was close to - but there was no one close to me. There were plenty of people and pokemon willing to be friends with me or more, and I had just been shoving them off without giving them a chance. Even those I was closest to - Topa and Ilma - I was keeping away from me for reasons I myself wasn't even sure of. I had only been looking at my side of things in my relationships, and tried to avoid anything that could have been hurtful for me, but I never tried to consider them from the other person's point of view. How much had I been hurting Topa by being so distant from her? Was I hurting Pico too? Agnes was probably right - it was time for me to step out of the comfortable safe zone that the mansion was and allow others to approach me, and the first step to doing that was to fix my existing relationships.

I turned back and returned to the living room. Rakuen was done cleaning and wasn't around, but Topa was still on the weird cushion. I walked to her and chirped until she woke up.

"Hey, Ruby", she yawned. "When did you come back? Sorry, I was sleeping."

"A while ago," I replied. "Mind if I join you?"

"Absolutely not!"

She shuffled sideways to give me some room as I hopped onto the cushion and nested against her. She covered me with her tails and I pushed myself to be closer to her.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"Just enjoy it," I replied.

I could feel more tears forming in my eyes, but I managed to repress them. In a low, almost whispering tone, I added:

"You know, I really like being with you. I shouldn't have tried to keep you away. I'm sorry. For that, and for all the times I've hurt you."

I felt her head move backwards in surprise. A few seconds later, she pushed it back against mine and drew her tails closer. Her heartbeat had slowed down slightly, and she was getting warmer. One of my ears was stroking her muzzle, and for a brief moment, I could swear I felt her smile.

Chapter 31

After dinner, we cuddled on Topa's bed in a similar way in complete silence as she didn't to start a conversation and opted to enjoy the moment. While I wouldn't have admitted it to anyone, I was myself enjoying it a lot more than I would have expected. I had been starved of any form of physical affection for too long, with Agnes never petting or cuddling me, and having Topa around to snuggle with was a relief. It was a very pleasant feeling and I promised myself to do it again.

I woke up to a weird snapping sound. Blinking slowly, I looked around me and noticed Agnes was at the door, holding a camera. She was smiling.

"Oh. Did I wake you up? I'm sorry, you two were just too cute."

I got up and stretching, yawning, then waddled to Agnes' legs and pressed against them. She picked me up and started petting me.

"I'm going to school. We're going to be given our new schedule. We don't have to bring our pokemon, so I thought I'd let you sleep and get some rest."

I barked quietly to acknowledge and she put me on the floor. When I turned around, I noticed Topa was awake. She barked gently at Agnes, who went to pet her before leaving, and got up stretching.

"Good morning," she said.

"Morning," I replied.

Although her greeting had more energy than it used to, she was still dragging herself and keeping her tails low as she walked out of the room. The random cuddling from me had obviously had some positive effect, but it wasn't enough. I needed to continue pushing

forward, but I also needed to be careful not to overdo it. I wasn't too sure what the best course of action would be.

After we ate breakfast, Topa retired to the river as usual. I hesitated to follow her, but decided not to, as I thought I would be intrusive. I simply went to the practice room to try and figure out how to summon fire outside of my body.

After a couple hours of fruitless attempts, I threw a few actual fireballs at the walls in a fit of frustration. I felt like I couldn't do anything without someone guiding me, but I knew there wouldn't always be someone to do it and I had to learn to figure things out myself. I didn't want to refuse help, but if I was helped too much, then I would become dependent on others and Agnes likely needed me to be independent at least to some degree. Above all, I didn't want to bother Topa with it, as I knew she'd accept to help but it would hurt her.

"Are you angry?"

I jolted and turned around. Topa was standing at the door, observing me. I had no idea how long she had been there.

I stood up and instantly started wagging my tails when I saw her, secretly glad she'd stopped isolating herself - it was a good indicator that she was getting better.

"I'm trying to do something but I'm failing," I replied, frustrated.

"You are trying to use your psychic powers, are you not?"

I simply looked away, folding my ears in guilt. She didn't need more confirmation than that and walked towards me before putting her head above mine.

"Do not feel guilty. You are not responsible for what happened."

My heart skipped a beat. I had been right all along - something had happened related to Topa's powers and she was feeling responsible for it.

"Neither are you," I hazarded, looking up at her.

She smiled faintly.

"I know."

I blinked a few times as she laid on the floor, ears and tails down.

"Huh? So..."

"You probably guessed right. Something happened."

She shook her head.

"I know I am not responsible. But... this is a case where logic does not work. Remember how you felt in your early days here? You were depressed because you were trying to justify what happened to you, but you could not find anything. You started blaming yourself and saying your transformation was a punishment, and it took quite some time before you overcame that."

I did remember. Thinking back about it, it was a really stupid idea, but back then, it was so solidly anchored to my brain that I felt like it could not be any other way.

She looked at me and I laid in front of her. Was she about to open up? Did my cuddling with her trigger that? Was she even ready for it?

"I think I owe you an explanation. I apologise for making you worried."

I shook my head.

"Don't apologise for it. Just get better."

She smiled faintly, then took a deep breath.

"Of all the destructive feelings one can have, guilt is the worst. You cannot reason with it. Even depression has a sense of reason, but guilt is purely emotional. People can feel guilty for things that are absolutely beyond their control, which makes it impossible to resolve. Some people who get in accidents feel guilty for surviving. Can you imagine that? Living with the guilt of being alive."

She wobbled her head from left to right as if to chase the idea away.

"When you came in, I feared you would feel the same. I did what I could to be as supportive as possible and show you that you should be relieved to be alive."

She peered at me.

"It worked well," I said with a smile.

"I feared you might feel guilty of surviving this attack that no one before you survived. Especially after what the houndour's trainer did."

She marked a pause, probably expecting a reply. Thinking back about it, I did have similar feelings, but the time I spent with Topa and the love she gave me prevented them from festering.

"It was worst when you started blaming yourself for the transformation. I thought I had lost and you would live with it all your life. I did not want anyone else to have to deal with guilt. To my surprise, you bounced off, and got better. Even today, I am unsure how or why, but I was very happy you did."

"Well, you helped me..."

"Probably," she conceded. "But I do not know how much."

She sighed again.

"Helping you with your guilt just made mine significantly worse. After you started going to school, I was left to brood with the idea that you had left for good. Someone, somewhere in my head, kept whispering that you might never come back. And you kept getting involved in dangerous situations and I grew more and more worried, but you would always come back. Then you started talking about your psychic powers..."

I could feel in every parcel of my body that this was difficult for her to talk about, but I didn't dare interrupt. She kept sighing and looking away, as if looking for the slightest distraction that would give her an excuse to stop. Her ears were laid and her tails completely motionless on the floor, and not once in her entire speech did she look directly at me.

"When you were brought here, you were in a cage. Do you remember?"

"Yes?"

"Did you notice how many vulpix were in before?"

I looked far back in my memories. I remembered at least three scents, one of which was very faint, and one of which I recognized as Topa's.

"Three?..." I hazarded.

"Correct. You probably guessed one of them was me."

I nodded.

"One of them was my mother's. She died when I was young, as I said before. The last one..."

She had a hiccup and a tear rolled down her cheek. I knew at this point I needed to stop her, but I didn't have the courage to.

"The last one was my son's."

My eyes widened. I had never even considered the idea she could have had a kit. This instantly caused a lot of inappropriate questions and terrifying thoughts in my head, and I started worrying that Agnes would want to breed me as well.

"Do you know how pokemon give birth?"

I shook my head.

"We lay an egg. But... There is a fairly long time of gestation before we do. We let the baby grow inside us first. The egg does not need to be incubated. We generally pour some of our power inside it to protect it from outside harm. This allows us to carry on with our lives or prepare for the birth of the baby."

She smiled faintly.

"Giving birth is not a pleasant experience, but being a mother is something magical. It... it is difficult to explain. It is more the fact that I had a child, rather than that I had a mate. Of course, I had been bred with a selected pokemon, so the egg's father never really intervened. I raised my kid mostly alone, since my mother died soon after my birth. This is usual for vulpix anyway, even in the wild, so I was not too alienated by it."

I wasn't sure what to say. At this point, I wasn't even sure she knew I was still around. It felt like she was automating the speech, as if she had been holding it in for so long that she no longer had control over the words coming out of her muzzle.

"He grew well. And he was intelligent. Nowhere as intelligent as you are, though. Ma'am loved him - it was her idea to breed me. To be honest, I think he only loved her and had no regards for me.

"He started experimenting with his psychic powers on his own very quickly. His father was a braixen, so I suppose he was naturally good at it. I helped him learn from what my mother had taught me, and he quickly became good at telekinesis. His Ember was really bad,

though. I feel like he did not like that move. Ma'am liked his telekinesis a lot, however, and he would happily perform tricks for her. I ended up not using mine anymore so that he could do everything himself. It made him happy.

"The problem was... he was curious. Too curious. He knew how to open doors with telekinesis. He would go in every room of the manor, even the ones he wasn't allowed to go in. One day, he tried to open the door to the forbidden aisle."

She shuddered at the thought. I remembered that door too well, and its lack of scent.

"Ma'am instantly stopped him and lectured him. He was really upset and angry, and he ran outside. Only..."

She sighed.

"He managed to open the portal and fled the house. And... he never came back."

I could see tears forming in her eyes. I started a movement to interrupt her, but I didn't dare carry it on. I didn't know what to say.

"Maybe..." I started.

She shook her head.

"Maybe he is lost? No, he is certainly dead."

I was shocked by the composure with which she could say that. It certainly wasn't easy for her to talk about her dead son at all, and she could just announce his death so easily. The closest I could get to how she was feeling was probably my own death, and I certainly wouldn't be able to be so direct about it.

"You noticed that neither of us wear a collar, did you not?"

I nodded.

"We used to. Canine or feline pokemon in particular are considered wild unless they have a collar that proves they belong to someone. Your friend Pico probably has one too."

She sighed. I couldn't tell what sort of sigh it was, but I could see a faint smile on her face for a moment.

"Collars are not as bad as you might think. If you think of them as an accessory, they are rather enjoyable to wear. Just like Agnes sometimes wears a necklace."

I had never seen Agnes wearing a necklace before, and I promised myself to try to pay more attention to it. When I was human, I didn't like jewellery much, and apart from a single bracelet I was given by the only boyfriend I ever had, I never wore any.

"Um... In my world, collars were exclusively to claim ownership of pets. There were not meant to be pretty."

"That sounds similar to what happens here, I suppose. It all depends on the way you see it."

I could see she was glad that the conversation shifted, but there was a look of determination in her eyes that told me she'd finish her story to the end no matter what. I felt like it would be best to offer her a break and pursued:

"I'm not sure I'd like to wear a collar. I never wore jewellery as a human. And I'm not..."

I hesitated.

"Well, you are an animal. Whether or not you think of yourself as a pet is up to you."

I looked away, saddened.

"I'm probably just a pet to Agnes."

She lifted a paw to pet me.

"That is something you two will have to work on together. My son certainly was not just a pet to Ma'am."

She took a deep breath, her eyes wandering back to the nowhere they seemed to try to escape into.

"As I said, we used to wear collars. Shortly after he disappeared, the entire family went looking for him. Tracing his scent was not that difficult for me."

Her snout moved up and down slightly, as if sniffing at something.

"Foxes have among the best senses of smell of the entire animal kingdom, you know?" she asked with a forced smile. "You should rely on yours more!"

"I... try. It's difficult though."

"I can teach you, if you want."

She smiled again. It was, this time, a genuine smile, and just the thought of being with me and teaching me something seemed to make her happy.

"We tracked him to the Glossy Forest," she continued. "At this point on, his scent was really difficult to detect. It was... mostly gone. The entire forest smells like nothing. Like the door."

She looked at me the eyes and I could see in her expression that it was a formal warning. There was something about this door and this forest, and she was telling me to stay clear of them.

"We never found him, but... we found his collar. It was slashed in two. And there was quite a bit of blood..."

She shuddered at the thought, and I couldn't refrain from going to her and pushing myself against her flank. She happily accepted the

cuddle, but continued.

"He was likely killed by something. Maybe a predator."

She shook her head, trying to chase the thought away.

"Ma'am was devastated. The day after, she got rid of every collar in the house, including mine. She immediately commissioned the gate to be rebuilt to be significantly sturdier and hired two more guards just to watch it. It was very odd. She was acting mostly normal, although she cried fairly often, but I could tell that she was broken. I think Agnes knew as well, but never talked about it."

She sighed deeply, then looked me in the eyes. Her eyes were slightly red, but she seemed to be mostly fine.

"I am certain that Ma'am blames herself for his death. Or blames me for teaching him to use his powers..."

"Why would she blame you? It wasn't your fault."

"Or was it? Would he have been able to open the gate had I not helped him with them? Would he have tried to open the forbidden door and got yelled at as a result?"

"Hey," I stopped her, poking her with my muzzle. "You can't go into this kind of question. You know that."

I hesitated. Why was I not able to find the right words like she was? How could I make her feel better? I had no experience with loss and I had never had to comfort someone before.

"I know," she replied. "But... as I said, guilt is the worst. You cannot reason with it. No matter how many times I tell myself that I am not directly responsible for his death, there is a lingering thought somewhere in my head that tells me I might be, and I cannot fully chase it away."

"I have done a lot of thinking since then, and I believe that Ma'am refuses to let us wear collars so that, if any of us escapes, she will never have confirmation that we are dead and can hold on to the sliver of hope that we are not. This is also why she was so angry at Agnes for bringing you in. She thought you might try to run away, since you were wild, and you would hurt Agnes in the process.

"I made it my responsibility to make sure you would stay. I watched over you until you were able to go to school. Now Agnes is the one watching. I have full confidence that you will never leave, but Ma'am does not. She thinks you will, and she hates you for the pain she thinks you will bring to Agnes."

She shook her head, as if the idea was absurd, then looked at me.

"You remind me of him a lot. He would never play with me either. He was all about Ma'am - just like you are all about Agnes. I keep telling myself that it is fine, but I know it is not. I do not want to force you to do anything, and it makes me happy that you love Agnes so much, but..."

She looked away.

"It makes you sad because you're feeling lonely," I finished.

She nodded silently, tearing up. I remained still for several minutes, barely taking measure of how much she had been suffering in silence. My original assumption that I was filling a gap seemed to be right, but at the same time, I didn't feel like I was just a replacement for her lost child. All the time I was recovering, she had been taking on herself to wait patiently, and after I was finally able to interact with her, I had been constantly refusing.

"Is that why you were so adamant to make me play with you?" I asked.

She nodded.

"I see."

I wasn't sure how to feel. I couldn't imagine what it was like to live with that burden, but it explained everything I had been wondering about her. The fact she opened up to me meant she was also open to getting better. This was probably what Pride meant when he said I needed to choose the right time. If anything, I felt like this was my chance. Also, her telling me what was bothering her meant that it wouldn't feel odd or out of place for me to change my attitude. It was just proof that I cared about her well-being more than about my pride and I was willing to make sacrifices for her the way she did for me.

I had no idea what to do and simply leaned onto her, offering to cuddle in silence. Her heart was still beating fast, but I had the strange feeling that she was more at peace than she had been before. Yet, something about this whole situation was bothering me, but I couldn't exactly point out what. I was persuaded that her true goal when she said she wanted to visit the Glossy Forest was to actually try and find her son's body, and I didn't think it was that good an idea. I had no idea how she'd react if she found it - or if she didn't. Part of me wanted to allow her to finally be at peace with this issue, but another part of me thought that it would be too painful for her and I should stop her from doing it. For now, I needed to keep pushing to speed her recovery, and the incoming lake trip was the perfect chance for me to.

Chapter 32

We were woken up far too early the day after. Looking up the window, I noticed that the sun had not even risen yet. I wiggled my way out of Topa's tails that were covering me and waddled towards Agnes.

"Good morning, you," she said while patting my head.

I started a quiet bark to reply, but I was interrupted by an irresistible need to yawn. After giving in and stretching, I was not any more awake, but Agnes didn't seem to care.

"Let's go eat, and I'll explain what we'll do."

She went to Topa to softly wake her up, then came back to me to pick me up and carry me downstairs. I was starting to enjoy being carried by Agnes, and it gave me another chance to avoid the dreaded stairs, but I couldn't keep Pride's words out of my mind. Even then, while being carried and almost cuddling with her, I didn't feel close to Agnes at all. Although that left a dent in my overall mood, seeing Topa come downstairs and eat lifted it back up. She had not been eating for several days - this was a good sign.

After a short but surprisingly plentiful breakfast, we went to the lobby, where we were quickly joined by Melissa. She looked just as sleepy as I did, but was shuddering visibly from excitement. This led to a hilariously contrasted behaviour from her, where she'd be constantly drowsy but still able to find bursts of energy to smile or jump in place when Agnes talked. Topa, on the other hand, looked perfectly awake, but I could tell from her scent and the way her ears and tails were moving that she was still depressed. The humans didn't seem to pick up on that, and continued talking about their plans for the weekend.

After a lot of talking, most of which I didn't pay attention to, Agnes clapped her hands to jolt everyone awake, and announced we'd be leaving. Rakuen was waiting in the hall and handed Agnes and Melissa a backpack each. She gave Topa and I a quick pet over the head, and opened the door for us.

I felt a pinch in my heart as we crossed the open gate and peeked at Topa. Thinking back about it, I had never seen or heard her get close to this place. Did she feel a similar pinch every time she saw the metal doorway, being reminded of the child she had lost? Was it painful for her to be here? Was it painful for her to watch me cross this threshold?

Only then, as I was thinking about it, did it dawn on me how hard it might have been for her to see me leave with Agnes to go to school, with no guarantee I would ever return. I could tell she had the most honest love for my trainer, but as her bus accident proved, even she wasn't safe outside of the mansion. How much of a relief was it for Topa to see us both return at the end of an excruciatingly long day, before the relief was taken away the day after as we left again? How much had she been suffering, in total silence, and still having the strength to smile when I was back? How could I have been so blind to it?

She didn't look particularly upset, and didn't even look back at the metal gate, a gentle smile illuminating her face, and I couldn't tell if that was a genuine smile or she was just going through the motions. These expeditions to the mountain lake used to make her happy, and it was possible that her body was just reacting that way out of sheer habit. Hesitating, I approached her meaning to strike a conversation, but she silently shook her head, telling me to postpone whatever I wanted to say for later. I obeyed without a word and we focused on the walk that was ahead.

Upon leaving the mansion's gardens, we turned right, walking by the fence, then followed a straight path for a dozen minutes that led us to a hiking track. At that point, my nose was assaulted by too many unknown odours, and it became difficult for me to remain focused.

The urge to sniff at them to identify them was extremely strong, but I had promised myself to follow docilely, and Topa was keeping an eye on me to make sure I didn't stray. To try to satisfy at least part of my curiosity, I sniffed at whatever odours I could reach while walking. Agnes and Melissa were talking merrily, but Topa didn't seem to be in a very talkative mood and simply followed, poking me occasionally to get me to hurry up if I stayed behind for too long sniffing at the floor.

After several tiring hours of walking, we left the hiking path, turning right from where we were into a dense patch of foliage. Upon inspecting the branches, I noticed that they had been broken on several occasions before, and a quick tap of my nose also taught me that it was by none other than Agnes and Melissa. Apart from there, I had not smelled any human scent since we departed, which made me wonder who made the track if nobody was going to use it. I followed Topa, who sneaked under the leaves while our trainers were battling them, until she stopped. At that point, Agnes leaned forward to pick me up, asking me to close my eyes with a mysterious smile. I obeyed not without fear, and felt the last few branches gently stroking my body as we made our way out of the forest.

"You can open your eyes now," she said, putting me back on the floor.

I obeyed, and my eyes widened when they adapted to the sudden change in luminosity.

The area before me felt like it was taken straight out of a masterpiece painting. A vast lake was spreading before my feet, made of water so still and clean it felt like I was staring at a mirror. There was a small beach made of pretty sand that extended right up to me and seemed to be free of any human waste. Across the border of the entire pond was a dense wall of trees green like I had never seen them before, stretching high in their fight to catch light above all others. Finally, overshadowing them, the mountains were standing proudly, their grey and brown colours contrasting nicely with the flourishing vegetation that surrounded me. Among them was a single

peak that reached out more than the others, dominating the area. It was covered in a bright white coat and reflected light directly into my eyes, making me unable to stare at it for too long.

The air felt so fresh it was difficult to believe we were actually not far from a town, as if the trees and mountains were protecting this lake from any form of human pollution. It was almost entirely odourless, smelling only like water and sand. The smells from Agnes' previous expeditions seemed to have been washed away by the gentle breeze, leaving the area new and free.

I remained immobile for several minutes, stunned by the beauty of the lake. I understood why they bothered wasting an entire weekend every month to go there. As a human, I would have paid a fortune for a chance to lay my eyes on such a landscape, and they had access to it at will. I almost felt bad for having come here, spoiling the lake by simply visiting it.

"Beautiful, is it not?" Topa asked, poking me gently with her muzzle.

She was smiling. It was a genuine smile - how could it not be? Just being in this place made me feel more at peace than I had ever been. If ever I found myself having to leave, I knew I wanted to come back here at least one last time.

Agnes led us close to the water, to a formation of rocks that was the only trace of their previous expeditions. It was set up around the remains of campfires that were long gone, in a way that allowed Agnes and Melissa to sit comfortably close to the fire and far enough from the water not to be at risk of being sprayed.

I wandered around the small camp as Agnes and Melissa were putting their bags down, smelling at the sand and rocks. Topa laid by the campfire, waiting.

Agnes pulled out sandwiches from her bag and gave one to Melissa. Sitting on the rocks, they ate quietly, enjoying the fresh air and the stunning view. As I went to lay by Topa yawning, the ninetales put

her head above me, covering me with her tails, and I quickly fell asleep.

When I woke up, I realised that a brown towel had appeared under me. There were two tents set not far from the campfire, and no one around to be seen. Peeking quickly under a tent, I saw Melissa and Topa sleeping, cuddling with each other. I couldn't help but smile at how peaceful they looked, wondering if Topa was genuinely happy or was still battling her depression. This was surely going to help, and I did not dare interrupt. I peeked inside Agnes' tent instead, feeling my heart pinched as she was sleeping alone. I grabbed the towel she gave me and dragged it into the tent, dropping it by her chest, partially covering her with it, and exited the tent, looking for things to do.

I just walked aimlessly around the camp for a moment. The lack of sensory responses from my pads compared to what I had with feet was extremely odd and difficult to adapt to. I had no idea if the sand was hurting me at all, and I had to purposely push on a sharp rock to realize that I was still able to feel pain in the pads, although they were significantly less sensitive than my feet - even less so than when I was wearing hiking shoes with particularly thick soles. I had to touch the sand with my snout to realize it was hot, and I was starting to realise why cats and dogs seemed to want to put their noses on everything.

Even then, there was a distinct lack of odours in this lake. It wasn't like that pokemon's corpse, that had no scent whatsoever - the smells of sand and water was so overwhelming that it completely erased any traces of other scents that may have lingered. I could smell Agnes, Topa, Melissa and myself, but nobody else, not even animals, as if the place was some sort of haven that even wild animals and pokemon agreed not to violate.

I looked up at the snowy mountain. Assuming that my hypothesis about Articuno was correct, could it be that this lake was part of his territory, and pokemon and animals alike were aware of it and

wouldn't dare trespass? Then, if they did know, why did the word not spread and every pokemon made aware of Articuno existing?

A shiver ran through my spine as I thought back when Topa mentioned the White Hat for the first time. She also made mention of an odd forest, and the Glossy Hills that surrounded them. Agnes had said that she found me crawling out of them, and the latest victim of the series of attacks I knew of was also caught near those. Could it be that whatever was causing those to be entirely odourless was somehow spreading to this lake? If so, was it unsafe for us?

My thinking was interrupted by quiet rustling coming from the edge of the forest. Startled, I ran back to the tent, before realising that I was pretty much in a safe haven and I could just run back to Agnes and Topa if I were to find anything dangerous. Treading carefully, I sneaked as quietly as I could towards the forest's edge, an uncomfortably long way from the tents. The rustling had stopped, but I kept creeping forward. Once by the bush that had rustled, I stopped for a second, then pounced right into it.

The first thing I saw when I landed was a cat-like paw, wearing an odd mix of grey and very pale yellow as colour. Looking up, I realized I was facing an eevee, who looked too terrorized to even move.

A quick sniff at the pokemon indicated she was female, and indeed scared out of her gut. I was surprised by how small the eevee was - about half my size. She had extremely long diamond-like ears that stood atop her skull as solidly as mine, despite being so long, and a tail so fluffy it almost made me envious. As expected, her collar was covered in a long, white mane that went down to her chest, while her fur was the weird shade of grey I had seen on her paw. Her face was very similar to a cat's, but her snout was minute, especially compared to her large eyes - made even larger by her current state of mind.

I backed off a few steps, sniffing at the floor, trying to show the eevee that I did not mean any harm. She mimicked my movement, and several minutes passed with us both staring at each other. She

eventually seemed to regain some composure and slowly stepped towards me, sniffing carefully at the floor and at the air. I remained immobile until she had the courage to come sniff directly at my paws. As I let her do it, I sniffed her as well, learning that she was hardly older than I was. She toured my body, smelling every parcel of it, until she eventually came to sniff at my head, and gave me a short lick on the snout. I sneezed as a reaction, and although she jolted backwards, I could hear her giggling. Slightly embarrassed, I turned my head away, and she licked me again, making me sneeze once more. She giggled more, and I licked her snout in revenge, making her sneeze in return. Unlike me, she did not seem to feel upset by it, and started genuinely laughing. After a few seconds, she calmed down and sat in front of me.

"Um... hi?" I hazarded.

The eevee jolted, apparently surprised, but eventually answered in a high-pitched, quiet voice:

"Hi?"

I took some time to think, trying to remember what I knew of wild pokemon, but I realized I knew far too little. I remembered Topa saying that wild pokemon were scared of humans, and knowing this eevee didn't seem to be too scared of me made my heart skip a beat as I noticed how comfortable I had become with the idea of being a vulpix, when I was worrying so much about it in my early days.

"Do you... have a name?" I hesitated.

The eevee looked at me like I had just said something stupid.

"Of course not. I'm not a pet."

I frowned, unsure how to understand the reaction and the tone of the reply. Was being a pet considered a bad thing among wild pokemon? Or, on the contrary, was it an enviable situation, so much so that wild

pokemon did not give one another a name, preferring to keep that for when they got adopted?

"Um... I'm sorry."

The eevee simply shrugged it off. I kept trying to get her to talk, as it seemed that wild pokemon did not talk much. As I insisted, she seemed to become more confident, maybe gaining assurance that I would not attack her, and seemed to be more willing to answer my questions. We were soon engaged in a casual conversation. I learnt that she was almost a thousand days old, which gave me three interesting pieces of information: that wild eevee, at the very least, were capable of counting; that they were aware of what a day was, although I had no idea how they measured it; and that they actually cared enough about their age to count it.

Once she was comfortable enough to freely speak with me, I eyed the eevee over, noticing:

"Your fur is... Grey?"

"Yes. It's weird, isn't it?"

There was a hint of disappointment and shame in her voice.

"It's rare, but I wouldn't say it's weird," I replied, trying to comfort her. "If anything, I'd say it makes your fur really pretty."

"Pretty?" she repeated, blinking at me.

I nodded, and noticed a faint smile on her face as she was avoiding my gaze. Her smile disappeared when her eyes stopped moving. Before she started speaking, I knew what she was looking at.

"You have a scar on your belly," she noticed.

"Yeah," I confirmed. "I... got attacked."

She frowned.

"Does it hurt?"

"No... not anymore."

She stared at the scar for a few minutes, before diverting her eyes to me, and stating in a shrug:

"You are weird."

"Huh? Why?"

"You're a pet, right?"

I nodded.

"Pets don't normally talk to wild pokemon," she added.

"Why?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Why not?"

"I don't know," I shrugged. "I haven't been a pet for that long. And I have no problems talking to you."

"Not been a pet for long? What do you mean?"

"Well... Agnes, my human, found me after I was attacked. I was dying and she saved me. I guess she adopted me after that."

"So you were wild before."

"I don't remember anything before I woke up, so..."

The eevee stared at me.

"You're really weird."

"Why?"

"Wild pokemon don't talk," she insisted.

"Why?" I asked.

"Why not?" she replied.

"I don't know," I shrugged. "Talking is fun."

"Why?" she asked.

"Why not?"

"I don't know," she replied after thinking for a second.

"You've never really tried!"

She frowned. Behind me, I could heard Agnes calling.

"Ah, my human is calling me. Wait."

I dashed out of the bush, running towards Agnes. She smiled as soon as she saw me.

"Now what have you found in that bush? Make sure you don't walk too far on your own, okay?"

I barked, forgetting about the eevee for a moment, happy to be with Agnes and receiving her full attention - and even happier that she noticed I was gone for only a few minutes.

Only then did I notice that she and Melissa both were wearing swimsuits, and Topa was already ankles deep in the water, shivering both from the cold and in anticipation. Agnes was busy inflating a plastic ball.

"Why don't you taste the water while I do this?" she suggested.

I looked at the lake, wary. Melissa had already joined Topa, who was neck deep in the water, but I wasn't feel confident. Although

everything went fine back at the pool, it was heavily controlled sanitized and heated water. This was an almost freezing cold mountain lake.

I stepped towards the water, careful not to touch it. After a few seconds of hesitation, I put the tip of my paw into it. I could feel the cold even through my insensitive pads, and tried to back off, but Agnes stopped me with a foot. She dumped her hand in the water and stroked the back of my neck. The freezing cold made me jump away from the water, shivering. It took me a few seconds to realise that the cold water running through my fur didn't feel as bad as I expected it to, and considered actually joining them. Agnes was in, but wasn't trying to force me to walk towards her. She was simply looking at me, patient.

Remembering the eevee, I ran towards the bush where she was hiding. To my pleasant surprise, she was still there, spying on us. She so intently focused she didn't see me coming and jolted when I whispered to her:

"Do you want to join us?"

"No way," she replied. "They're humans."

"They're my humans. I promise they're nice. Also, don't say you aren't interested."

She remained silent for a few seconds.

"Have you ever had a chance to play with humans?" I asked.

"We don't really play with humans. They're..."

"Nonsense!" I interrupted her.

I walked behind her and started pushing her with my muzzle. After struggling for a minute, she gave in, and followed me out of the bush.

"Agnes, look!" Melissa shouted.

Agnes, Melissa, and Topa all looked in my direction, obviously surprised by the eevee that was accompanying me. The wild pokemon, noticing she was being looked at, whimpered and tried to hide behind me, but I simply walked on, confident. We reached the shore of the lake, and the eevee sat down far enough from it not to be in reach of the humans.

"Is that your friend?" Agnes asked with a smile.

She walked out of the water. For a moment, I was scared she'd be too forceful and try to touch the eevee, but she walked to me and crouched to pet me instead. She wasn't ignoring the pokemon, but she had obviously noticed it was scared, and didn't want to be too pushy. She returned to the water and I followed carefully, Agnes stretching her arms around me to catch me if I were to slip.

The water was insanely cold as it started making contact with my upper legs. Before it reached my belly, I clenched my teeth, fearing it would be painful. It felt colder than on my legs, but it wasn't painful, and by the time my back became submerged as well, I realized that the cold, clean water actually felt rather nice flowing over the scar on my belly. It didn't take me long to feel comfortable enough to start walking around.

The eevee's eyes were locked on us, overflowing with envy, but the pokemon was frozen in place. I tried to encourage her, but my words wouldn't do, and she remained immobile. After watching me try to convince her to join us, Agnes walked out of the water, knelt by the eevee, and stretched an arm forward to allow the eevee to smell her hand. After a few minutes of a fairly tense situation, the pokemon gave in to her curiosity and smelled the finger stretched towards her, then dumped her head into Agnes' hand, who happily started petting her. She then joined us in the water, allowing even Melissa to touch her, and started playing with everybody as if she had been part of the family all along.

We played in the water for most of the afternoon, and I could see that Topa was genuinely enjoying herself. I made it a point to play with her more than I was playing with anybody else, and while the eevee was playing with the humans and the ball, Topa and I were playing water games together. When we finally decided it was enough, Topa was dried by Melissa and I by Agnes with a clean towel. The eevee was standing by the fire, and I had to grab the towel off of Agnes' hands and toss it onto the eevee for my human to dry the wild pokemon. The eevee's eyes closed themselves out of sheer pleasure as she was being rubbed.

Topa lit the campfire while I was with the eevee, making sure she didn't get too scared, and Melissa started heating some pre-made meal on a pan. Agnes gave Topa and I some croquettes that weren't as good as what we usually ate, but I dove in happily. Topa stood aside, letting the eevee eat, and only ate what was left in the dish.

When the sun was finally set, and only the campfire was providing light, Agnes and Melissa were laying on their towels, looking at the stars, and talking about mundane things, while us three pokemon were sitting by the water. I couldn't help but notice how, even at night, the white cover of the mountain stood out from its surroundings. Topa was staring at it as well.

"The White Hat," she said. "It's very close from here. Probably less than day if we walk fast."

"Maybe this is our chance," I suggested.

Topa shook her head.

"We'll have to make it clear we want to go there next time," she said. "We'll be going back home first thing tomorrow."

The eevee poked me with her muzzle.

"You're interested in that snowy mountain?" she asked.

I nodded, and she shivered in reply.

"It's too cold," she said.

"Have you been there?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"I tried going, but it got too cold and I gave up. Nobody goes there, anyway."

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "It's always been the case. It's a bit like this lake: no one wants to disturb it."

"But you came to the lake," I noted.

"Well, I heard noises, and I saw you..."

"Are we doing something wrong by being here?" Topa asked.

"I don't think so," the eevee replied, turning her head away. "This lake is nobody's territory."

"Where is your territory?" Topa continued.

The eevee looked up at the mountain.

"Small patch of forest by the snow," she replied. "I'm not strong enough to expand it."

She blushed as she said that, then curled up against me, remaining silent. Topa and I exchanged looks, then looked at the mountain together. It was just there, closer than ever - so close that it felt like we could touch it if we but extended our necks. We were sitting at its foot, dominated by its magnificence. The moonlight was reflecting strongly on the snow, shining directly into our eyes without being uncomfortable or painful to look at. The White Hat looked so close to

us that it felt like it was taunting or inviting us, sitting proudly within our reach, but still hauntingly inaccessible.

Chapter 33

I woke up quite early on my own the day after. To my surprise, the wild eevee was sleeping with us, comfortably tucked between Topa and I. She didn't seem to be awake yet, and I decided not to move in order not to prematurely end her sleep.

I was right outside of Agnes' tent, which was closed to keep the temperature inside in control. The campfire by my tails was still kindling weakly, emanating a faint light that reflected nicely on my fur. I took some time to appreciate the beauty of it, and how healthy my body now looked, especially compared to what I remembered of my tails when I first saw them. Looking at the wild pokemon that was with us, I realized that she looked a bit less scrawny than I used to, but definitely not very healthy. In spite of that, she didn't seem to be sad or depressed in any way. She was sleeping peacefully, smiling mildly, her head tucked against my belly.

My eyes wandered from the eevee to Topa who was also sleeping, although she looked less happy than the wild pokemon. I could tell that the events of the day before and my playing with her in the water had done her a world of good, but I had the disturbing feeling that it wasn't enough. I knew I had to keep pushing and slowly fix my attitude towards her so she would not feel so lonely anymore. Since her son died, she had been alone in the house. There were no other pets or pokemon, and no wild animals in the gardens. The humans were also gone most of the day, which meant that although there were plenty of people in the mansion, there really was nobody for her to be with. For years, she had been completely alone in the gigantic house, probably wandering the corridors bored beyond belief. When I was brought in, I had no idea how sad she was feeling, and she had been able to conceal that perfectly - but I knew, and I had a chance to change it.

It was quite early in the morning and the sun wasn't fully up yet. The red tint of the dawn was reflecting beautifully on the white snow of

the mountain, in a light so strong that it made my fur look like Topa's. I lost myself admiring the colour difference for a moment. Just like dawn evolved into day, vulpix's red fur evolved into ninetales' golden coat, and they grew more tails like the sun grew larger as it made its way into the sky. Staring in silence at Topa's fur, envious of the beauty and strength that it hid, of the wisdom that she had been displaying, I couldn't stop thinking about the stories surrounding ninetales and wondering what kind of secret power she was hiding from me, envious of all of it, wishing that I myself would one day evolve and become as strong and wise as she was.

The eevee moving against my belly jolted me me right back to reality. She stretched shortly, then opened her eyes. Jumping back as she noticed me, she hesitated for a few seconds before easing up, remembering what had happened the day before.

"Good morning," she whispered.

I couldn't help but smile. Since our first encounter, this was the first time she engaged a conversation. She seemed to be much more comfortable around us than she first did, and still had this faint glow of happiness on her face.

"Morning," I replied.

She got up and walked up to the water, drinking straight from the lake, making me wince in disgust.

"I'm surprised you didn't sleep with your human," she said.

"We... don't really sleep together," I admitted.

I felt a pinch in my stomach as I said that. Looking back at the tent, I realised I had missed a golden opportunity to cuddle with Agnes for the first time since I turned into a vulpix. Although I had been cuddling with Topa instead, it wasn't the same thing to me.

"You really love her, don't you?"

"I... guess. I mean, she saved my life..."

The eevee squinted at me, then at my scar, then back at me.

"What?" I asked, uncomfortable.

"That's an excuse," she replied.

I raised my eyes to the sky, annoyed.

"I don't want to be lectured on my relationships by a wild pokemon, and it's too early in the morning to be thinking."

The eevee giggled.

"You are so odd."

I wasn't sure how to take it. Was she becoming aware that I really wasn't a pokemon? Was my attitude or way of thinking giving it away?

"I guess it's because of all those rules you have to obey," she continued. "There are rules where you live, right?"

I nodded, and she shook her head.

"Humans and their rules. If you want something, just take it, even if you have to fight for it. There are no rules in the wild. If you love your human, why don't you show her? Don't let the rules get in the way."

"I don't know if I'm allowed to... what if I get punished?"

"What kind of place do you live in where you get punished for showing affection to someone?"

"But..."

I had no idea what to reply. She did have a point, albeit a strange one.

"Humans think that their pets are privileged for living with them, having more food than they can eat, a roof to sleep under, toys to play with. They think that their presence means the pokemon is happier than it would be in the wild. They assume that being around them is a good thing."

She shook her head, then sat down, looking me in the eyes, her gaze flickering with jealous defiance.

"They don't know what it's like to live in the wild. We have food - maybe not as much as pets, but enough to eat sufficiently. We don't need a roof - a big leaf, a tree, or a rock are just as good. We don't need toys - anything is a toy if you're playful enough. Domesticated pokemon hardly have more than we do on that regard. And they're bound by a set of rules that they don't understand, and get punished if they don't follow them even if they don't make sense."

"But... we're safe. Living in the wild is dangerous..."

The eevee scoffed.

"Do you feel safe? The very people that you think will take care of you are also the ones hitting you if you look at them the wrong way. Is that safety? In the wild, you know who wants you dead and who doesn't. You know who to fight and you know how well you can fight. Would you fight back if your humans started hitting you? No, you wouldn't. None of you pets would."

She sighed.

"Do you know why the humans call us wild?"

I hesitated.

"Well, it's because you're... not domesticated?"

"It's because they can't control us," she replied flatly. "They hate what they can't control, so they throw a danger label at us. They tell

their children not to touch us. They grow up learning to be scared of us, like we're going to attack them on sight. That's nonsense."

"Then... why are wild pokemon scared of humans?"

"Scared? Who told you we're scared?"

I looked at Topa.

"She misunderstands. We aren't scared. If anything... we're envious. And I said earlier, if we want something, we fight for it."

"I don't get it," I replied, puzzled.

The eevee sighed, and gestured to me to follow her. She led me to the bush where I had found her, and had me look at the forest.

"What do you see?" she asked.

"Nothing?"

"Not nothing. Nobody."

She turned to me.

"In the wild, only the strong survive. If you can't hide or fight, you won't last long. Even for pokemon that live in herds, it's survival of the fittest. The herd doesn't hesitate to abandon the weak to save the others. It doesn't matter how many other pokemon there are around us, we're alone."

She poked me with her muzzle.

"But you pets, you aren't. That's what we're envious of. Before meeting any humans, most of us are fine with our situation. But... as soon as we see a human, and a domesticated pokemon, we see what it's like to have someone. And that's something we want."

"Why? If you're happy with your situation, why want more?"

She looked up to the sky, visibly annoyed by my stupid questions.

"We aren't happy - just content. Seeing someone else be happy makes us want to be as happy as they are."

"What about the rules?" I asked. "You seemed to be so... disapproving of them."

She nodded.

"I don't like those rules. That's why I never tried to be adopted. I'm an eevee, I could just walk into a town and I would be adopted immediately."

"Wait. Wild pokemon are aware of which pokemon are popular and which aren't?"

The eevee looked at me with dubious eyes.

"Of course. Anyone knows that. That causes a lot of resentment among pokemon who do want to be adopted, but aren't popular. That's why a lot of us have to hide or live in herds."

I remained silent for a few seconds.

"I had no idea," I eventually said, genuinely sorry.

"Of course not. Humans don't realise that. They don't care what happens to wild pokemon, unless those pokemon are of use to them"

I looked the eevee in the eyes, dead serious.

"You sound like you hate humans."

"I don't," she immediately replied, looking away. "I just..."

She stopped talking, looking into the void. After a few seconds of silence, she simply turned back to the lake and walked up to it. I

silently followed, surprised, trying to understand what that reaction meant.

Topa greeted us with a sleepy smile. She had finally woken up, but looked tired still, and although she did feel happier than a few days before, I could tell she wasn't exactly happy yet. Seeing Topa awake reminded me of my very odd relationship with her, and as an attempt to make her understand that she did matter a lot to me, I ran to her, my tails wagging rapidly, and bumped my head into her fluffy chest.

"My, what a lovely welcome," she said, putting her head above mine. "What gives?"

I peeked at the eevee to check her reaction. As expected, she was staring intently at us, her pupils widened, twitching in place.

"Well," I replied. "I'll explain that later, okay? Just enjoy for now."

"Right."

Topa followed my advice and simply cuddled with me for a bit. The eevee had turned away from us and was staring at the mountain.

"You two want to climb there, right?" she eventually asked.

"Yes," Topa replied, walking up to the wild pokemon.

"I'd recommend you don't try. It's too cold."

"You said so yesterday," I replied. "We can fight the cold if we're prepared."

The eevee shivered, then looked at the quiet tents.

"Please tell me you don't plan on bringing the humans with you."

"Why not?" Topa frowned.

"You... can't. Bad things happen to humans who tread on the snow. It's dangerous. Pokemon are allowed, but we can't go too far in anyway."

"Bad things?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. It's... what I heard. There haven't been humans in this area in years. Even before I was born."

Topa and I peeked at each other.

"The mountain is forbidden for humans," the ninetales explained. "Any humans. It has been for centuries."

"I guess they realised it was too dangerous."

After that, the eevee buried herself in silence, visibly worried and scared. If Articuno really was residing in that mountain, it didn't want to be disturbed and was making it clear.

A movement in the tent behind me made me turn around abruptly. Agnes emerged slowly, yawning.

"Aren't you noisy," she smiled.

My ears laid flat immediately as if I were being scolded and I walked up to her feet. She chuckled softly and knelt to pet me, saying that it wasn't a problem and she had been awake for a while already, simply listening to the wind and to us barking. The eevee was looking at me again, but I couldn't read her facial expression.

"Are you going to stay with us until we leave?" Agnes asked the eevee.

The latter jolted, surprised to be directly talked to. After a bit of hesitation, she shook her head, and started walking back to the bush. Agnes shrugged, disappointed, but simply waved the eevee goodbye as Topa and I watched her walk away. We didn't try to stop

her, but I was disappointed as well that she would leave so soon. I thought I had made a new friend.

Agnes added wood to the campfire and started eating some quick breakfast. Sitting by her side the whole time, I didn't pay attention to her and was thinking about what the eevee said about humans rules and how being a pet was more dangerous than living in the wild. There was something odd about that eevee. It felt weird to me that she was able to communicate so clearly - just as well as with any pokemon before. I would have expected wild pokemon to be less intelligent, or at least less fluent in their own language, especially given that they don't actually speak much to one another in the wild.

I looked at Topa to check her reaction, but she was busy trying to sneak into Melissa's tent. Amused, I watched her struggle for a moment before joining her and unzipping the door for her. She walked in and nested next to Melissa, deciding to properly finish her night.

"I had no idea you knew how to unzip this," Agnes noted, impressed.

I jolted and turned around. I felt like my heart turned freezing cold immediately. Did I just...

"Just from seeing me do it? You're amazing!"

She was being genuine, and was obviously very proud of how quick-witted I had just shown to be. I looked away, blushing through my fur, ashamed of my mistake. Thankfully for me, Agnes interpreted that as a form of modesty from being complimented, and insisted on that, petting me to make me understand she did mean it. Although that felt reassuring, she was staring at me with something I couldn't describe in her eyes.

After Melissa woke up and had a quick breakfast, we started packing things up and cleaning behind us. Topa and I helped as we could, but it was mostly the humans doing the work, having to undo the tents. I kept peeking at the bush I found the eevee in, hoping she'd

burst out of it to at least come say goodbye, but to my disappointment, she didn't, and we left the lake in silence, as if we were mourning the good times we had there.

The return trip felt heavier. Nobody was talking, focusing on the path to go. I was sad that the eevee didn't come see us again. Did I make her upset with that last conversation we had? Was she too sad to know we'd have to leave to have the courage to see us go?

I looked at Topa, who was walking quietly slightly behind Melissa, to her right. She had an ever so faint smile that I had always seen her show when her human was around. Just like mine, her ears kept moving around, attracted to every sound around us, and her tails were floating gracefully behind her. I had no idea how she was currently feeling, and her body language wasn't telling me anything either. I didn't know if I should try to talk to her when we were home, or let her be with her feelings, but was certain I had to do something and try to capitalize on what little improvement there was thanks to the trip.

Unfortunately for me, I fell asleep in Agnes' arms as I was too exhausted to continue walking and she had to carry me through the last quarter of the trip or so. When I woke up, I was in Topa's room, on my pillow, alone; the lights were off and the door almost completely closed. Agnes had probably given instructions not to disturb me, and despite my best efforts, I couldn't find Topa in the mansion. I went out and, as expected, found her by the river.

"Do you understand now why I like this river so much?" she asked as I approached.

I laid down by her side, pawing at the water.

"... no," I confessed.

She chuckled and covered what she could of my body with her long tails.

"This river comes from the lake. Whenever I come here, it reminds me of all the good times I have had there."

That probably explained why she liked retiring to this place when she was feeling sad, although that habit puzzled me a bit. When I was feeling sad, I would carefully avoid being reminded of what made me happy, and try to cultivate the sadness until it passed. Topa seemed to be doing the contrary, trying to focus on what made her happy and to fight the sadness away.

"You know," I said, hesitating. "I think you're... I mean, you should try..."

She looked at me and blinked twice.

"What are you talking about?"

"You come here because it makes you happy, right? It reminds you of happy times."

She nodded in confirmation.

"When I was human, I... didn't do anything like that. When I was sad, I just gave in. Listened to sad songs, isolated myself, watched sad movies. I didn't fight the sadness, I just... you know."

"That sounds backwards," she replied. "How can you get better if you are not fighting the sadness?"

"That's the thing," I explained. "You can't fight sadness. The more you try to fight it, the more it festers. Trying to remind yourself of what made you happy isn't fighting, it's... avoiding. And that doesn't do you any good."

She lowered her head, staring at the water, seemingly thoughtful.

"That does make sense," she eventually said.

"Avoidance is... natural. It's the normal way to react to pain. Admittedly, it mostly works. But, for mental pain, it doesn't. It just makes things worse. You've been..."

I hesitated, unsure how to word it. I was scared that a poor choice of words on my end would undo any progress she'd made so far.

"Ever since your son died, you've been trying not to think about it, right?"

She nodded again.

"Well, that's avoidance. It just... It made you feel lonely because you had no one to be with during those times. When Agnes brought me back, you focused on me. That gave you an excuse to..."

I stammered again, and she nodded once more to signify she understood what I meant.

"What do you think I should do?" she asked.

I stared at her. It was the first time I remembered her ever asking for my advice on anything. I felt a knot forming in my stomach, but did my best to ignore it and tried giving her an answer.

"When something happens in a school, management temporarily opens a special... um... they set up a place where children can talk about what happens. They encourage them, and their parents, to visit it and think about it. Talk to someone, often a psychiatrist."

"So you think I should talk to someone?"

I sighed.

"Maybe not talk to someone, if you don't feel like it, but... at least not avoid it. If you want to deal with the sadness, you'll have to face it at some point."

"Is that the idea behind you listening to sad songs? That sounds odd. Listening to sad songs just empowers the sadness, does it not?"

"Not exactly. It's..."

I remained silent for a few seconds. She had a good point - why exactly was I doing that?

"It's the way I faced sadness," I eventually explained. "It's how I expressed it. That's what I think you should do. Stop avoiding your memories, just face them. If you want to... overcome it, you will have to face them. Or, rather... you have to allow yourself to be sad. Let yourself feel it. If you try to suppress it, it's just going to eat you from the inside. You have to allow yourself to... mourn."

I looked at her, looking for a reaction, but she was still listening. She showed no signs of being sad, even though I was mentioned her dead son. She seemed to be genuinely looking for my advice.

"That's the grieving process. You have to allow yourself to grieve. You'll get better once you have."

"How do I do that?" she asked.

"Well, you should cry. That really helps. And... face your feelings. Ask yourself the questions that have been bothering you. Clear our your doubts. For example, I know you're..."

I took a deep breath. It was difficult for me to talk to her face about her dead son and how she felt about it.

"You feel responsible for it, right?"

She hesitated a moment, then nodded.

"Then you have to ask yourself... Are you really responsible?"

She turned her head away, looking into the void. I could see her eyes shimmering. As I got up, she barely peeked at me. I put my head above hers, just like she did when I was feeling down.

"These are things you have to solve for yourself. Nobody can help you. If you think you need to talk, I'll always be there for you. But stop running from your feelings."

She returned the hug and I left, leaving her alone with her worries to sort. I felt like I was about to cry, but I knew I couldn't allow myself to - not when Topa needed me to be strong, as I needed her to be strong when I was feeling down.

Chapter 34

"Ruby!" I heard a familiar call when I passed the door.

Agnes was just coming out of the library. She had a piece of handwritten paper with her and was wearing very casual attire, which felt odd to see her in after seeing her in her police uniform so often.

"Come here, we need to talk."

Although her tone was neutral, I immediately folded my ears, feeling guilty. I had no idea what I had done or why I was being scolded and scooped myself towards her, and she petted me gently.

"I'm not going to scold you, silly. Tomorrow's the first day of pokemon battles."

My heart skipped a beat when she mentioned it. Given everything that had happened before, I had completely forgotten. The only bit of training I had was when I was learning Ember and Topa had me dodge and shoot Ember. I vaguely remembered her short description of how a pokemon battle went, but I was certainly not ready to participate in one.

Agnes brought me to the lounge and sat on the biggest sofa. As she tapped the leather next to her, I jumped by her side and laid down.

"I don't know if you've been in a battle before, but you've certainly never been in a trainer duel, right?"

I nodded.

"Let me explain how it works, then."

She turned on her seat to me, bringing her legs onto the couch. I hopped from my laying position onto her lap and bumped my head into her stomach before nesting. As she was explaining, she was

absently petting me, looking at me to make sure I understood everything.

"Alright, so... I'm not going to be doing all that much, you know. All the fighting will be on you. And the pain. Are you sure you want to do this for me?"

I looked her in the eyes and nodded with confidence, secretly grateful and heightened that she actually asked me if I was willing to fight for her, instead of simply ordering me to. It made me feel like she did care about my well-being and about my opinions, even though I was merely a pet to her.

"You won't be using your real powers, of course. Only unpowers, so there's no risk of being injured, even if you pass out. It's going to be really different from the brawling tournament too. Who is physically stronger won't matter - strategy and execution are key."

She marked a pause and I nodded again to indicate I was following thus far. She smiled.

"That means that even if you lost to Flick in brawling, you have all your chances to win this."

I barked with enthusiasm. I wasn't too upset about my loss anymore, especially given that my results were significantly better than I expected.

"So, the team is split in two. There's you and me. You'll be on the field battling, of course, but I have to do work before and after the fight."

She shook the paper she was holding.

"I've been doing research. That's what the trainer does - they do research and come up with strategies to defeat the opponent based on what they know. I also have to try and figure out what my opponent will do, and plan counters for it. It's like a game of chess."

She chuckled.

"You don't know what chess is, but... essentially, it's a battle of wits. The better strategy often wins. Of course, it's not enough. Because... execution matters, and that's where you come in. I need to make sure you understand my strategy and you can apply it. But I can't give you details on every countermeasure I planned either, or you'll be overloaded with information and get lost."

I frowned, offended she would think that I would be overloaded with information, but it was a sensible thing. She needed to tell me as little as possible so that I could focus on executing her plan.

"So that's the limit of my role before the battle. During the battle, of course, communication and trust will be key. If you don't trust me, you're not going to follow on my ideas. And if I don't trust you, I might give up on the correct counter because I think you might not be able to execute it."

She looked at me again, and gave me the biggest smile I had seen her with since I first met her.

"I have no doubt you'll be able to do anything I ask of you, even if it's impossible. But you also have to trust me and follow with everything I tell you to do, even if you don't immediately understand why."

I barked, jumping out of her lap to bump my head into hers then bury it in her chest, my tails wagging with great speed. Chuckling, she pushed me away as I tried to lick her cheeks. I didn't keep that up for too long, knowing I wasn't allowed to lick her, and returned to my nesting position against her. She petted me and put the paper in front of me, on the sofa, pointing to it. It had a lot of notes on poochyena, and a drawing of the arena floor.

"Now," she explained, "our opponent this time is a poochyena. She's slower than you are, but she's also physically stronger and that's your weak point. She will definitely try to push into melee and if she does, there isn't much you can do to defend yourself."

She paused again, and I nodded quietly, focusing on the paper and her explanation.

"We're going to use your speed to our advantage. If you're faster than she is, then you can dodge her attacks, but she might not be able to dodge yours. However, she's also more experienced than you are at battling, and we need to remember that. She'll probably know how to deal with ranged attacks like Ember."

I nodded again. This was sensible, and I fully agreed with the analysis so far. I would likely be unable to keep her at bay and we needed an idea for when she inevitably closed in to melee.

"We're going to lay a trap," Agnes explained. "Faith knows you only know Ember and will think we'll try to keep the battle at distance. However... you can still fire Ember at point-blank range, so you aren't helpless if Flick comes close. They'll probably know that, but consider that a single attack is all it will take to win."

I was embarrassed when she mentioned I only knew Ember, but she was correct. This limited our options to great extent, and would make us too predictable. Using that to lay a trap was a clever choice.

"What I want you to do is do your best to keep Flick away. We need to play in their hands and make them think they read through us. Flick will likely be ready to take a couple hits in order to close in, so if you do hit her, don't claim victory - she will expect it. Once she charges and gets close to you, use your speed to get out of the way and throw another Ember directly at her. The most important is that you don't get hit."

I nodded again. I was happy to realise that this was in line with the short training I had with Topa, which meant I wouldn't be going into the battle with absolutely no experience.

"I did some research on poochyena's moves," Agnes said, pointing at the top of the page. "Flick might know Sand Attack and Mud Slap. Neither of those have great range, but they would seal the deal for

sure if they land, especially Mud Slap. It's effective against you, so it might knock you out in one hit. I think that's what Faith will try to do. If she doesn't get directly in melee range, she'll try to land a Mud Slap."

She then pointed at the bottom of the page, with the diagram of the arena and the recognizable pokeball design in the centre.

"This is what the arena will look like. Of course, you're technically allowed to go out of bounds, but it rarely happens. There really aren't any rules to this, apart from using only unpowers - no biting or anything!"

I nodded one final time and she nudged me off of her lap.

"Sleep a lot this night, you'll need as much energy as you can muster tomorrow."

She kissed me on the forehead and left.

I remained in place for a long while, staring at the door she had passed through.

She had just kissed me. It was the first real display of affection I had ever received from her, in spite of my efforts to get closer. Her petting always felt void of any affection, and she was being too careful with her hands for it to really be enjoyable, as if she were handling a particularly fragile vase. In my early days in the mansion, I was grateful for the carefulness, but now that I knew I was fully healed, I had been looking for affection, and I had finally been given some.

I vividly remembered my parents' kisses when I was a baby, but this felt entirely different. It wasn't just because my skull was thinner, and I had a layer of fur that vibrated funnily when kissed - it was the feeling behind it. It wasn't anything like the love I had for my family or my friends, even Topa. It was an entirely new form of love that I had never experienced before.

I went back to Topa's room in a state of pure euphoria. She noticed, of course, but didn't question me, smiling as usual when I nested in her fluff, covering me with her tails. Looking at her beautiful fur, I was reminded of how I had been unconsciously hurting her, depriving her of the affection she wanted, just like Agnes had been depriving me. After a short hesitation, I stretched my neck to reach Topa's head and licked her cheek.

It would be impossible to describe exactly what she tasted like, but it was similar to her scent, and I very much enjoyed it, despite her fur sticking to my tongue. I only licked her once, as she withdrew her head in a reflex, surprised.

"My, I did not expect that," she said, looking at me.

I didn't reply and pushed my head against hers, eventually falling asleep on her legs, covered by her tails.

When I woke up the day after, the feeling of euphoria was regrettably gone, but I was still feeling its effects. I was full of energy and rather excited at the prospect of battling, even though I knew what sort of pain I was about to throw myself into. I was nervous, albeit less than for the brawling tournament, but I felt like it wouldn't be much of a factor. For the brawling tournament, I had no confidence and I wasn't too enthusiastic, but this was different. I was genuinely looking forward to it.

I was surprised to see that the maids took extra care to groom me. Monday was not, in general, a grooming day, but they still spent around an hour washing me, brushing my fur, and trimming my claws to give me a proper look. It was all wasted effort - after the battling, I would be just as dirty as I was when I woke up. In a way, I understood the intent. This was to be my first pokemon battle, so it was a remarkable event, but I didn't exactly understand the need for it.

I was euphoric once more when Agnes finally came to the kitchen after breakfast to tell me we were going. I followed her to the car,

tails wagging, and hopped on the front seat. There was no cage, this time, and I was simply buckled up against the car's chair. It wasn't too comfortable, with the seatbelt pushing against my chest, but I wasn't caged anymore.

"We're not going to the school, this time," Agnes explained as she was taking the driver's seat. "The gym is too small for all the first-year students, so we're going to the pokemon stadium instead."

I immediately imagined what I saw in the anime, when the main character battled for the pokemon league: a gigantic football stadium, with an oversized battle terrain in the centre, and thousands of people watching and cheering. Of course, I knew we wouldn't be playing on the big stage, if there even was such thing, but the image had me even more excited.

The thought brought another question to my head, much more interesting than the idea of fighting in the pokemon league: was there a pokemon league at all? If so, how did it happen? Did trainers have to collect badges, or was it more like any other sports event, with regional qualifiers then nationals? Was there a pokemon world cup? If so, was the winner titled "pokemon champion" like in the games?

It took a long time to reach our destination - I estimated twice as long as reaching the school. I spent most of it trying to figure out how a pokemon league would happen, but I couldn't come up with anything that made sense to me. I wasn't too familiar with sports and tournament rules, and made myself a note to ask Topa later. Until I could, I had to focus on my upcoming battle.

"We're there!" Agnes said, unbuckling me.

Upon exiting the car, I froze in place, struck by a feeling of awe I had rarely felt before.

The building in front of me was huge. A regular football stadium didn't even compare. It looked more like an ancient roman chariot-

racing stadium, and certainly shared architectural details - the exterior walls were decorated with countless intricate pillars. The sun reflected powerfully on windows hidden by the ornaments, and even though I couldn't see through them, I estimated that it was a corridor going all the way around, probably leading to the main stage. The stadium was also quite tall, though it panned in like a layered cake. I counted half a dozen stories, with the highest one surrounded in a crown of stone.

"Do you like it?" Agnes smiled, not without a hint of pride in her voice. "We won't be using the main stage, obviously."

She gestured at the many stories going up.

"There are small stadiums going all around the building and inside of it. The open-air ones are for flying pokemon, mostly. The higher the arena, the bigger it is, although big ones are kept for tournaments or sports events. Of course, the highest one is the main stage. It's about as big as a sports field, I suppose, although it's split in two."

She picked me up and carried me to the entrance, still explaining.

"There are some enclosed arenas underground as well. Those, and the ones on the second floor, are open to the public. Anyone can pay a small fee to have access to one of those for a given time. It's pretty awesome!"

I sneezed as we entered the building. The first floor looked like any average stadium, with as many different smells as one would expect. There was a receptionist desk similar to a hotel's, with a giant array of keys safely guarded behind reinforced glass. A fairly young man was sitting, busy staring at his desk, but looked up when Agnes approached.

"Ah," he said. "Police trainee, I reckon?"

"Correct."

The man looked at his computer, scrolling down a list. I couldn't see the monitor, but I assumed it was the list of bookings.

"May I have your name?"

"Trokair," Agnes replied casually.

The receptionist continued scrolling, muttering to himself, then stopped.

"Ah! Let's see... Floor minus one, arena 38."

He looked behind him at the keys.

"Someone's already there, it seems. One moment. I'll also need your badge or ID, please."

He got up from his seat and disappeared into what seemed to be a back room as Agnes pulled out her police trainee badge and put it on the counter. After only a few seconds, another man came out and exited the reception booth. He looked at Agnes with a smile while the first receptionist took the badge in and started typing on his computer.

"If you would follow me. Is it your first time here?"

"Yes," she replied, not looking too flustered.

"We don't allow the public to access the underground arenas, unless invited or booked in," the man explained as he lead us to a staircase. "They're generally used for practising, and trainers don't really like having an audience in those cases. First floor arenas are free to access, at least for spectators."

We passed by a door that bore a scent that was familiar to me.

"This is the inner pokemon centre. It's fairly small, but sufficient in case a pokemon becomes injured by accident."

We stopped before a fairly massive steel door that the receptionist opened with a badge, which he gave to Agnes.

"Use this to get in or out of the floor. Please don't exit the building with it. Once you are done, remember to stop by the front desk to return it and retrieve your ID."

He wished Agnes good luck on her training, gave me a quick pet on the head, and left us.

Finding our arena wasn't very difficult. The corridor seemed to be going around the whole building, as expected, and every room was labelled. The door to the one labelled 38 was opened, and led to a rather large but short corridor, which opened onto an area similar to the police school's, but bigger.

"Oh, Agnes."

It wasn't Faith's voice, as I expected, but Doctor Belish's. He was sitting in a chair in a corner of the room, speaking with Faith. Ilma was laying beside him while Flick was being petted on her owner's lap.

"Doctor?" Agnes asked, surprised.

She nodded quickly at Faith, who simply returned a smile.

"I'm here to supervise. Or, more accurately, check on Ruby. Pokemon battles are a lot more strenuous than just brawling, so we want to make sure she handles it well."

I frowned, annoyed at how everyone seemed to think that I wasn't capable of handling a bit of physical stress. I looked at Ilma, looking for some comforting, but she was just smiling.

"Also, I'm really curious to know how she will do. I have to say, she's gathered quite the reputation since the brawling tournament. Who thought a pokemon this young could be this good?"

My eyes widened. Ilma, seemingly interpreting that as disbelief, nodded to confirm. I struggled a bit to be put on the floor, then walked to the vapoleon.

"Is it true?"

She nodded.

"For a pokemon this young and with no experience, you did unbelievably well. A lot of your classmates look up to you, you know?"

I wasn't sure what to reply and simply kept quiet.

"I guess we can get started, if we're all here?"

Ilma looked at me.

"Do you know the rules?"

"Agnes explained them to me yesterday, but... a reminder won't hurt."

The vapoleon smiled faintly, and repeated the rules. They were exactly what Agnes told me, except she added that trainers weren't allowed to touch their pokemon, but were free to communicate with them.

"Let's get straight into it," the doctor suggested. "We'll do a best of three, so the first of you to win two matches is considered the winner."

He pointed to the wall behind us. There were two doors, one on each side of the corridor.

"We'll have a 15-minute break between each match for you to re-examine your strategy. Those booths are completely soundproof, so you won't be disturbed. I won't be talking while you're fighting either,

unless you break the rules. Consider me the referee for this, I guess."

Both Agnes and Faith nodded at the same time, then went to one end of the drawn arena. There was a short pedestal for the trainer to stand on, probably to avoid being hit by one of the pokemon's moves. Flick and I moved to our positions as well.

I was getting really nervous, but at the same time, I was overflowing with excitement. I remembered Agnes' strategy well, but I realised that she had not mentioned what to do against Mud Slap or Sand Attack at all. Was I supposed to improvise? Would she tell me what to do if the attacks did happen?

"Are you ready?" the doctor asked.

I certainly wasn't. I actually felt even more nervous than in the brawling tournament, even though it didn't seem that those nerves were incapacitating in any way. It was more of an impatient twitch than a stressful worry.

"Three."

Back when I realised I had turned into a pokemon, this had been one of my first thoughts. I didn't take proper measure of how much my situation had changed since, but I felt a lot more comfortable in my body than I used to.

"Two."

Was I ready for this? Not as a pokemon, but as a human. Was I really fine with being thrown into a gladiator pit to be abused and hurt for the amusement of my trainer?

"One."

I looked at Flick, who seemed to be heavily focused. What was she going to do? Open with Mud Slap? Rush in to melee range?

"Go!"

No sooner had that been pronounced than Flick, as expected by Agnes, ran up to me. A weird faint white shield was forming in front of her, in a form of energy I had never felt before. I threw myself to the side, rolling to safety, and dodging what I assumed was a Tackle move.

I whimpered as I turned around. Flick was in full offence mode, showing teeth and claws and growling quietly. Her back was arched and her fur spiked menacingly on her spine. She looked genuinely scary - much more than I ever would.

She charged again. I dodged in the same manner, and noticed I had brought myself back to my starting position. My tails instinctively covered my belly as I slowly stepped back towards Agnes for protection.

Flick seemed to notice and lost the menacing pose. She looked a bit worried.

"Come on, Ruby," Agnes said in a comforting tone.

There was a hint of impatience in her voice, as if she was disappointed that I got scared. Peeking to the side, I noticed Ilma watching, but she wasn't showing any emotions.

I took a deep breath, gathering my thoughts and focusing. I couldn't allow myself to be nervous. Thinking back about Topa, I tried to adopt the same menacing position she had. Flick smiled, visibly happy and excited.

"Let's go!" she shouted with enthusiasm.

I nodded. Flick arched her back again, but this time, I didn't give her time to charge. I threw an Ember directly at her that she had no trouble dodging.

Once again, I felt the immense excitement in my inner flame. It was pulsating and radiating like never before, and my nerves were soon completely eclipsed by this new feeling.

Firing a new Ember at Flick, I stepped back cautiously, trying to maintain a certain distance between us. She easily dodged again, and charged at me. I waited until the very last moment to step aside, then turned around and threw a point-blank Ember.

It connected. Flick likely didn't expect me to shoot Ember so quickly after dodging. She tensed up, then shivered, but turned back around, seemingly untouched. I had no idea how much that had hurt her, or how much more she could take, but I could see in her eyes that she was overwhelming happy. That was a bit puzzling to me, but I couldn't afford to question it for now - I had to fight.

"Continue, Ruby!" Agnes shouted in encouragement.

"Flick, use Mud Slap," Faith replied after a second of hesitation.

My heart skipped a beat as Flick pounced into the ground, creating a puddle of energetic mud that flew right into my face. I ducked by reflex, throwing an Ember straight ahead of me.

I was surprised to see that it connected as well, and Flick looked as baffled as I was. She likely didn't expect that either and had been stopped in her tracks trying to charge in.

I felt a chill in my spine as I realized that I was now two hits ahead, and one or two more would secure victory for me. For my first pokemon battle, I was doing amazingly well. I needed to press the advantage.

Flick and I exchanged Ember and Mud Slap for a minute or so, dodging each other's attack easily. Realizing this wasn't getting anywhere, we stopped for a second.

"Bite," Faith ordered calmly.

At this point, I knew that she would charge into melee range. I immediately shot an Ember to stop her, but to my surprise, Flick simply sidestepped it. Before I could react, a puddle of mud had been thrown towards me, and I got hit in the shoulder.

I emitted a loud whine in pain. This was the worst pain I had experienced - Topa's Ember couldn't even compare to it. I staggered back, shaking widely, focusing entirely on trying to resist the pain. Again, it felt like the feeling was located outside of my body, but it was much more crippling than any muscle pain I had before. Recovering my thoughts, I quickly scanned in front of me to check where Flick had gone.

She was standing right in front of me. With a smile, she tapped the ground with one paw, sending another wave of mud at me, lifting me off the ground slightly and making me roll on my side.

I whined again, but this time, I was unable to get up. My entire body was cramped and refusing to obey my commands, and I was struggling to breathe.

"Enough," Agnes ordered, sounding obviously disappointed. "We lost."

Chapter 35

Flick came up to me and licked my cheek.

"Are you feeling alright?" she asked.

There was no worry in her voice, but a form of empathetic questioning that I had never heard before. It wasn't exactly the same tone and feeling as when Topa asked me how I was, but I could tell she genuinely cared.

Although I could breathe normally, I was still feeling the immense pain in my entire body. It was an odd feeling, as if the pain was located right outside of it, at the tip of every hair of my fur, but I couldn't move. Flick licked me again, actually worried this time.

"Are you conscious?"

I took a deep breath, focusing to talk despite the pain.

"I'm alright."

Agnes knelt and gently picked me up, petting me softly. The moment she touched me, it was like all my pain disappeared, and I could move my body freely again. I peeked up, not daring look her in the eye.

To my surprise, she didn't look disappointed at all. She was fully focused on comforting me, and I didn't think twice before giving in to her care.

"Alright, to your booths," Belish said in a neutral tone. "You've got fifteen minutes to rest and reconsider your strategies."

Agnes carried me to the booth and closed the door behind me. It was a rather tiny room, with a whiteboard on one wall, a large sofa laying opposite to it, and a table between them with a large carafe of

water, glasses, and bowls of varying heights. She put me down on the table and filled the lowest bowl with water for me drink, then a glass for herself, and sighed.

My heart broke within my chest. That was the full extent of her disappointment, and she was no longer hiding it. She had been holding it in so it wouldn't show to Belish and Faith, probably to keep a persona up, but now that we were separated from them, she had no qualms in letting me know how much of a failure I had been.

"I'm sorry, Ruby."

I didn't dare move. Was she about to give up on me?

"I wasn't good enough."

I squinted at her as she said that. She was sitting on the sofa, looking down, twirling a blue marker pen in her hands pensively.

Only then did I realise that her disappointment wasn't directed towards me - it was targetted at herself. She was taking the blame for our loss and that seemed to have made a serious dent in her confidence. I had never seen her like this, so down and powerless. For a moment, I thought I was looking at the girl in the hospital that had just been abandoned by her parents.

I wouldn't abandon her.

I hopped from the table onto her lap, making her jolt in surprise. Sneaking through her arms, I pushed my head against her in an obvious cuddling gesture. She dropped the marker pen and chuckled.

"Don't worry, Ruby, I'm alright. I can't let one defeat get me down. We can do this."

As much as I admired her spirit, I could tell at that moment that she was simply putting on an act, trying to act tough and pretending

nothing got to her. From seeing Topa do the same and eventually crumble to a point where I nearly couldn't help, I knew she couldn't keep this on. Insisting, I kept prodding at her face with my muzzle.

"Stop that!" she ordered.

Her loud, angry voice caught me by surprise and I simply stepped back. Why was she angry? I was trying to help her. She wasn't feeling well and I wanted her to talk to me, tell me how she was really feeling, or at least allow herself to express her emotions. Why was she rejecting me?

She gently picked me up and put me back on the table.

"Let's try to figure out where we went wrong."

She walked up to the white board and became thoughtful. I was staring at her, still surprised and hurt by her earlier reaction. Did she care so little about me that she didn't want to be helped? Or was she trying so hard to keep her act up that she wouldn't allow anyone, even me, to break through it?

Why was this happening so soon after she had given me the first real display of affection I ever had from anyone other than Topa? Was she disappointed or hurt by my defeat? Was she going through that roller coaster of emotions herself?

"Ruby, are you alright?"

She was staring at me, looking worried. I shook my head and yelped with enthusiasm to let her know I was listening. I couldn't let her know her reaction bothered me.

"The Bite attack was a trap for us," Agnes explained. "They knew you'd try to keep Flick at bay. I think the whole exchange before it was simply testing your reaction speed and accuracy with Ember."

She looked concerned.

"Now that they know, they're definitely going to change their strategy in the next fight. Flick is fast enough to dodge your Ember while charging, so we can't rely on that anymore."

She looked at me, and the hint of disappointment I saw in her eyes broke my heart.

"You not knowing several moves is a big problem for us, I think. We'll have to work on that."

I looked away in shame. To my surprise, Agnes petted me on the head.

"Don't worry, it's not that bad! We'll have to be creative though."

She sat on the table next to me and stared at me, possibly studying my body. I stood still, unsure what to do.

"They'll expect you to keep your distance, I think. Just in a different way. So let's pretend we want to, but this time, you let her come close and you fight from point-blank range. The problem is, that leaves you really vulnerable, so you'll have to be very mobile and not let Flick hit you, alright? I know you're faster than she is and I know you can do this, but it is risky."

I nodded. It was a stupid plan, but I understood the idea behind it, and couldn't think of anything else. It relied on me being able to dodge melee or point-blank attacks, which I had no experience in whatsoever. I was going to have to improvise.

She spent more time going over what strategies she thought Flick and Faith would use, and what I had to do to counter them. She asked that, if she gave me an order, I obey unconditionally, as it would mean she had an idea on the spot and she trusted me to execute it.

There was a knock at the door as Belish told us that break time was over. When I went back to the arena, I became extremely nervous

again. It was a different sort of anxiety, however. I wasn't so scared of the battle anymore - on the contrary, I was rather looking forward to playing again - but of the pain. I could still feel it lingering around my body, threatening me quietly. Flick seemed to be perfectly fine, which meant I started with a disadvantage. Then again, I wasn't sure if the few hits I landed had really done anything to her. I hadn't even seen her flinch.

We took positions on the area again. Flick looked really joyful, but I didn't share the feeling. I was still nervous and honestly scared of being hit again. Despite that, I was feeling somewhat excited, and the first battle had been a lot of fun despite the loss. I wasn't sure whether or not I was looking forward to the next one, or wished I could just run away and not battle anymore.

"Both ready?" Belish asked.

We both nodded at about the same time. The poochyena lost her smile and started focusing, ready to battle. I mimicked her movement and felt my inner fire sparkle with renewed anticipation.

Belish counted down from three and gave the start signal. Immediately after, I shot an Ember at Flick, who had no trouble dodging. I needed to make her think I was going to keep her at bay again. Shooting fireball after fireball as a barrage, trying to aim at where I estimated she would move, I suppressed the poochyena to prevent her from approaching. She seemed to be fully focused on dodging my attacks and had not thrown any moves of her own yet.

"Flick, contest with Mud Slap," Faith ordered after around a minute.

"Ruby, slow down," Agnes immediately replied.

I was busy throwing moves around as Agnes gave the order, and Flick stopped trying to dodge. Instead, she challenged my Ember with Mud Slap. As expected, her move obliterated mine, but I was too focused on firing as fast as I could to see it coming. Before I

could react, the mud energy hit me right in the face, making me stagger back.

"Roll to the side!" Agnes shouted.

Without thinking, I obeyed and tossed myself to my right. Peeking back at where I was a moment ago, I saw Flick land with an odd dark purple energy surrounding her muzzle.

Flick turned to me and pounced again. I had a hard time dodging this one and I certainly wouldn't be able to evade the next attack.

"Do it now!" Agnes ordered.

Her plan came back to me in a flinch. As Flick pounced on me again, I released an Ember as big as I could make it, landing it right in her throat.

To my surprise, it seemed to successfully stop her attack. She winced when the fireball hit and her Bite attack vanished as she landed on top of me. Without waiting, I shot another point-blank Ember into her throat. She emitted a loud whine and staggered back.

"Continue!" Agnes encouraged me.

"Use Mud Slap again," Faith calmly ordered.

There was an exchange of hits. I threw another Ember directly into her right as she used her back legs to toss a Mud Slap under her, directly into my side.

I yelped in pain, extracting myself from under Flick with difficulty. It was the same pain as before, but this time, only my lower body felt completely debilitated. I could move my head and front legs and used them to crawl back to Agnes, meaning to take the position I had when we started the battle.

"Enough," Belish said as Flick repositioned herself behind me.

Agnes petted me again. The way her hand shook gave away her anger, but she was still forcing herself to smile.

"That was good," she said.

"Indeed!" Faith confirmed, walking in to check on me. "I didn't expect you to stay in close range. Thought you'd win when Ruby got herself under Flick and started shooting Ember.

"You still won," Agnes replied crudely, unable to hide her frustration.

"But you're doing better," Belish intervened. "Don't give up."

He knelt to check on me as well.

"Ruby might need a little more rest. I suggest we cut it for today."

He stood up and patted Faith on the shoulder, then gave Flick a quick pet on the head.

"Good work, you two. That was good."

I watched as they left, impatiently waiting for the doctor to repeat the gesture with Agnes and I, but he never did. He waited as well until our opponents had left and turned to us, sighing.

"I can't say the same about you."

Surprised and genuinely hurt, I look at Ilma for support, but she simply shook her head in silence. I felt like my heart was about to stop when I read the disappointment in her eyes.

He went into one of the booths to take a chair and offered a seat to Agnes by the arena. She obeyed silently and I waddled to her side. Belish and Ilma took similar positions in front of us.

There were several minutes of silence during which none of us was moving. I could hear everyone's heartbeat and sense the tension in the room. Belish and Ilma both looked like they were about to yell at

us, and Agnes was as puzzled as I. Whatever was coming, it wasn't good.

"That was your first battle, wasn't it?" the doctor asked me, breaking the silence.

I nodded nervously.

"You did quite well, I think, for your first two battles. You can be proud of yourself."

These words didn't seem to affect me at all - upon hearing them, I felt my tails drop to the floor completely and looked up at Agnes, who was so tense I could have kicked the chair out from under her and she wouldn't have moved a bit. From the corner of my eye, I saw Ilma nod in agreement to the doctor's statement, and it made me feel only marginally better. I could still read the disappointment in my trainer's eyes.

"Relax, Agnes, I'm not going to yell at you. Victory or defeat doesn't matter as long as you had fun. You're here to learn and I'm going to ensure that. That's why I stayed and watched."

That didn't make Agnes any less tense.

"You lost twice today, so tell me. Run me through that first battle."

Agnes took some time to think. It was probably difficult for her to think analytically, considering her state of mind, but she was making that effort nonetheless.

"I'm not certain we had the upper hand at any point in the first battle," she analysed. "I was expecting Flick to try and close up on Ruby to use Mud Slap at close range, since it's weaker from a longer distance, while Ember remains strong until it disappears. I told Ruby to try to keep Flick at bay."

"Sensible strategy," the doctor nodded. "Continue."

"Ruby got the first two hits on Flick when she tried to charge in," Agnes continued. "She dodged the charge and simply shot Ember in melee range. But then, Faith ordered Flick to use Bite and Ruby fell for it. I didn't realize it was a trap and I couldn't tell her to dodge, and that's how we lost."

Belish seemed to be taking mental notes, as he didn't reply. After a few seconds of silence, he raised his finger.

"That is your first mistake. You weren't listening."

"Well, I heard Faith order..."

"You weren't listening" he insisted, cutting Agnes off. "You let Ruby decide on her own how to deal with that new order instead of finding a counter. But Ruby was battling and trying to keep Flick at bay as you said, and had no idea how to deal with the move once the charge started. It was pretty obvious that Flick and Faith knew they could avoid the Ember shot to counter the charge, or they wouldn't have gone in for Bite, wasn't it?"

Agnes' fist tensed up as she nodded.

"You should have instructed Ruby to get away, or given her an option to counter the charge other than simply tossing an Ember at Flick. Admittedly, you seem to have realised that on your own since you did that in the second battle, but we'll talk about that later."

He raised a second finger.

"Your second mistake was trusting your opponent. When you heard the Bite order, you immediately assumed that it would be carried out. You were caught by surprise by their trap and fell right for it. It wasn't Ruby that fell for it, it was you both."

He had in his eyes a form of disappointment I had never seen before. I had no idea how he was exactly feeling, or what he wanted

to say, but we had been doing something wrong beyond simply losing and I had no idea what.

"In the first charge, Ruby was able to accurately shoot an Ember, dodge, then shoot another one. It was pretty obvious that you could have done the same again, so Flick and Faith weren't going to fall for it. But you never questioned that order, and thought they'd continue attacking straight-on. They used that against you and that's how you lost. They knew you'd first throw an Ember to counter the charge, then dodge at the last moment. As expected, Ruby threw an ember, but Flick used that to throw a Mud Slap of her own knowing you wouldn't expect it. And at that point, it was game over."

He peeked at me with sorry eyes, making me feel like I wasn't at fault for our losses. I wasn't myself exactly sure why we lost, but I was eagerly listening, determined to get better.

"What was your strategy for the second battle?"

"I wanted Ruby to take them on in close range," Agnes replied. "Flick and Ruby are fast enough to dodge each other's attacks from long range, so that would have lead nowhere. However, Ruby is faster than Flick and I was hoping to use that. I told her to pretend she was trying to keep Flick away, but instead of countering the charge, to let her come close. She could dodge the attacks and retaliate from melee range. I knew it would leave her vulnerable, but I thought it would work."

"It could have," Belish replied. "Surprising strategy, but by no means stupid."

"Well... Ruby never really got to execute it. Instead of dodging the Ember, Flick contested them with Mud Slap. Ruby didn't react in time and got hit, and then she was stuck under Flick and couldn't do anything."

"Correct. I'm surprised you didn't consider Mud Slap would easily overpower Ember. You did well in telling Ruby to slow down in reply

to the Mud Slap order. That would have allowed her to react in time to dodge and continue the pressure, or set up for your strategy."

I looked away in shame. So that second loss was my fault, for failing to follow through on Agnes' idea. Had I been more careful I would have been able to dodge the Mud Slap and maybe execute our initial plan.

"You also did well in recognising that Ruby had been stunned by the sudden Mud Slap and telling her to carry on with your plan to help her. Without that, the Bite would have hit and you would have lost earlier. That allowed her to focus on the fight again. And then you helped her evade an attack she didn't see coming."

He nodded.

"Second fight was much better than the first one, but you still lost. Why?"

"Ruby got caught under Flick. Our whole strategy relied on her using her mobility to dodge and attack safely."

"Why did you not tell Ruby to get out from under Flick then?"

"I..."

She looked away. That was a weird question - if anything, I was also at fault for not recognizing that I was trapped and that we couldn't continue with our strategy.

The doctor sighed.

"Your strategy was correct. Ruby's execution was more than decent. She's faster than I thought she would be and clearly understands what you want her to do, and your strategies were smart and would definitely have worked. If anything, individually, you're better than Faith and Flick. Ruby is indeed faster and more accurate than Flick, and you were able to read through their initial strategy without a

hitch. But when the battle started, you just fell apart and lost the advantages you had."

He looked at me, then at Agnes, and shook his head slowly.

"Your teamwork, however, is non-existent. The first fight made it painfully obvious, although the second one offered a bit of improvement on that, but it still wasn't enough. What happened was you sent Ruby into battle with a rough outline of a strategy, then you left her to her own device. And when you did try to intervene, Ruby wasn't listening and executed your order too late."

He marked a pause to look at our reactions. I wasn't sure if any of this was true or not, but Agnes looked devastated.

"You have no synergy. Let me ask you a simple question. At what point of this whole talk have you said we?"

He sighed again, not even trying to hide his disappointment anymore.

"You said it just once: 'we lost'. For the rest of your analyses, it was she or I. Just look back at the first battle - Ruby being faster and more accurate than Flick allowed her to take the upper hand. As long as things were going according to your plan, you were ahead. Of course, since you're better than they are. But when Flick and Faith read through your strategy and teamed up, you lost the advantage and couldn't do anything. Ruby alone couldn't have won as she wouldn't have had time to come up with a new strategy. And you coming up with a new one wouldn't have helped if you weren't guiding her. Let me make this clear: Ruby didn't lose. You didn't lose. Each of you did better than your counterpart, but their teamwork was that much better. That's what wins battles: teamwork."

"Ruby did her best," Agnes replied.

"And you didn't?"

"Of course I did."

"I saw how you two looked when you went out of the booth. You were blaming yourself for the loss and Ruby was trying to understand why you were upset."

"It's not her fault," Agnes insisted. "I don't want her to think I'm disappointed in her."

"I notice you aren't doing much to prove that," the doctor remarked.

Agnes looked at me with guilt in her eyes. At this point, there was nothing she could do or say to deny that. Even if she were to try to comfort me, it would be too late. Anything she were to do would feel fake as the result of an order given by a superior, and she was well aware of that. Ilma shook her head in disappointment, obviously already aware of this.

"Once again. It's not about you, Agnes, or about Ruby. It's about you two. Your team. Do you even trust each other?"

"Of course we do," Agnes replied with anger.

From her tone, I wasn't sure anymore if she really trusted me. I even started to doubt my own trust in her.

"Let me ask a private question, if I may."

"Go ahead."

"How much of your life do you two share? Do you sleep together? Eat together? Do you do anything together?"

"We..."

Agnes didn't dare finish her sentence and looked away from both Belish and I. I could tell that her guilt was getting overwhelming for her and she was only realising that she had been doing everything wrong.

"There are strict rules in my household, sir, you know my parents."

"So what? Ruby's your partner, not theirs. If you want to spend time with her, they have no right to stop you from doing so."

"I..."

Agnes seemed to have completely lost the will to defend herself. My first thought was that it was a good thing - it meant she acknowledged she had made a mistake and was willing to listen to advice. Upon further review, however, I grew increasingly worried for her. This was certain to take a toll on her confidence and our relationship, and I was afraid it would take a wrong turn. All I wanted was to jump on her lap and lick her face until she told me stop, but the doctor staring at us scared me, and I was afraid he would use that to attack Agnes again.

"That's your first step, then. Get closer together. I mean, look at yourself, she's sitting by your side when she should be on your lap."

Agnes tensed up. I knew she didn't dare do anything, being aware that all her actions would seem fake. She looked at me and I could read pity and guilt in her eyes. She seemed to genuinely care, but there was always a wall of sorts between us that made her unable to really show it.

"I don't understand," the doctor eventually admitted. "You two seem so close, so why are you acting like complete strangers? Or rather, why is it your relationship seems to be so broken? It's obvious that Ruby loves you - not because you saved her life or take care of her - just because she loves you. I can't say you don't love her, but you're not allowing yourself to. Why? That just hinders you both completely, and not just for this."

The doctor stood up.

"It's time you start considering Ruby as your friend, not as your pet. You'll be surprised to see what you can do with a real friend."

He patted Agnes on the shoulder, then petted me, and left the room. Ilma followed him, looking at me with sorry eyes, and the room fell into silence.

Chapter 36

Neither of us moved for what felt like several minutes. Apart from the thundering of heartbeats, there were no sounds that I could hear. The booths seemed to be decently isolated from the rest of the building, but that created a heavy, stressful atmosphere, where no sounds were coming in from the outside even to my sensitive ears. Although I could simply extend a paw and touch Agnes' leg, it felt like we weren't even in the same room. Getting increasingly annoyed by the silence, I gently mewled at Agnes to try to get her to react.

She got up.

"Let's go back," she simply said. "Are you feeling alright? Can you walk?"

I nodded with little enthusiasm, but that seemed to be sufficient for her. She grabbed her backpack, opened the door for me, and we left the room.

Agnes drove fast, if not recklessly, on the way home. I had never been nervous when in her car, but that time, I didn't feel too safe. Although she looked perfectly fine, I could tell that the doctor's speech earlier had hurt her, but I was hoping she could bounce back and our relationship would improve. If it didn't, that was probably the breaking point, and it wouldn't be long until she gave up on police school... or on me.

The thought made me shudder. Feeling a hand on my head petting me gently, I barked with joy, trying to communicate that I was feeling fine so Agnes would focus on the road, but she didn't take her hand off of my head unless to change gears.

Surprisingly, we made it home without any accidents. I was rather happy to finally get out of the car and rushed to the building. Agnes followed slowly, and while I was going upstairs to Topa's room, she

followed to her own, shut the door locked, and didn't show herself until dinner.

I found Topa by the river, pawing absently at the water, seemingly lost in thought. She didn't even notice me approaching and only realised I was there when I poked her with my muzzle. Her immediate reaction was to sniff at me once.

"You smell upset," she noticed.

"It's a long story," I replied, unwilling to talk.

I smelled her in return, but I was unable to tell how much better she was feeling. She still smelled as depressed as before, at least as far as I could tell.

"Are you feeling better?" I asked.

"I... am not sure," she confessed. "I have been thinking about what you said, but I do not know how to proceed."

"What do you mean?"

"You said I had to face my feelings, did you not?"

I nodded.

"How do I do that?"

I remained silent for a few seconds. Both Agnes and her seemed to have great trouble in expressing their emotions and had learnt to repress them from the start. That wasn't something I could imagine - how did anyone live without it?

If both Topa and Agnes were struggling with it, was Melissa also having trouble expressing herself? If so, could it be that they were never taught how to, or raised to believe they should never do it? Then the problem originally came from their parents, and it was likely I wouldn't be able to do too much to help them.

Topa was expectantly staring at me, waiting for an answer. I didn't know what to reply. How did one face their feelings? I felt like it was one of those things that I did without thinking about it. If a human asked me how I moved my tails, I would just shrug and reply "I just do it". It was the same thing to me when it came to facing my feelings. I didn't remember having trouble with them.

Then again... in my early days of being a vulpix, I seemed to have been stuck in a form of depression I couldn't get out of, but as hard as I thought about it, I was unable to tell exactly when I started getting better. It just happened on its own, probably as I was getting a better hang of my situation and finally having the freedom to face my feelings.

"I... I'm not sure," I eventually replied. "Give me time to think about it."

"Sure!" she replied with enthusiasm.

Although she was still rather depressed, it made me happy to see that she was able to be enthusiastic or joyful again. There definitely was progress since she talked about her son, and I hoped she was on the right track to getting better.

My ears and tail dropped immediately as I was reminded that I now had another relationship to work through: my friendship with Agnes. Was it even friendship? Pride was the first to emit doubt, and Belish was now sharing them. Even Agnes herself seemed to have silently agreed that she didn't consider me a friend. How was I supposed to take it? Had she always been aware of it, or was she nodding in realisation? If she already knew, then it was likely our relationship would never improve, as it would be something she was consciously doing, but if she had not realised, I knew there was hope - assuming Agnes managed to bounce back and get better.

"Let us go back," Topa said, stretching. "Dinner should be served soon."

I followed without replying. I didn't think I would be able to actively work on fixing Topa and on my relationship with Agnes in parallel, and I had to make a choice. The best solution would probably be to help Topa first, then let her improve her situation and introspect on her own, as there was little my input could do for that, and work with Agnes while the ninetales was busy sorting herself out.

During dinner, Agnes seemed like she was perfectly fine. Her behaviour hadn't changed a bit, but I could tell she was simply hiding her feelings in order not to worry anyone - assuming her parents would worry at all considering what they did to her in her childhood. As far as I could tell, even Topa was fooled by my trainer's remarkable composure, and although she knew that I was myself upset, she had the kindness not to prod further into it. Once she was done eating, Agnes withdrew once more to her room. That was unusual, as she would normally spend some time watching TV, or at least the news, but nobody seemed to care about it, probably assuming that she was simply tired.

I sighed as I watched her climb the stairs quietly, not even looking back to check my reaction. I decided to go with my plan to focus on Topa first, thinking that Agnes would need time to sort her own feelings, if she knew how to, while Topa was in need of immediate help and had even expressed it clearly. I followed her back to the river, where we laid in the sand, pawing lazily at the cold water in silence.

I had never realised how quiet this place could be. The sound of running water seemed to add to the silence rather than disturb it, and other than distant sounds of birds chirping and leaves whistling, there was no noise that came to disturb the peace. The stream's water had the same scent as the lake we were in, and I was only beginning to understand why Topa liked this place. It was just as peaceful as that withdrawn sanctuary we had defiled, but much closer to the house, and made me feel like my current emotional turmoil was weighing a lot less than I knew it was.

"Can I ask you a question?" Topa inquired.

"Sure," I replied, not looking up from the water.

"What does it mean to face one's feelings?"

I stopped pawing at the river and looked at her. She looked strangely peaceful, but there was still some sadness in her eyes. She was actively trying to heed my advice, which made me immensely happy, but didn't seem to be able to fully understand it, and she was asking for directions.

"It's like... not lying to yourself. Sometimes you're simply trying to tell yourself you're good, when in reality you're well aware you're not, but you don't want to admit you're not because you feel like it's wrong."

"Could you develop? How does this apply to me?"

"Let's see..."

I took some time to think. I could potentially hurt her with my reply, and I needed to avoid doing so, but I also needed to tell her the truth, as that was the only way I could help her. Bringing more avoidance would be counterproductive, but being too direct would be hurtful. I had to be careful.

"Let me ask you something too," I eventually said. "It's... part of my explanation. I need you to reply with your gut feeling - don't think, just say whatever first comes to mind."

"I will try."

"How do you feel about... your son's disappearance?"

As expected, she marked a pause during which I could clearly see pain in her eyes. However, as promised, she replied quickly.

"I am sad, but I can live with it."

"Continue?"

"Um..."

She made a frowning expression, as if focusing, and didn't reply.

"See?" I said. "This, right there."

"Pardon?"

"You can't go further than that. Like your brain doesn't let you think about it more. Whenever you try, it's like you can't think anymore. You get distracted, or you get stuck at simply thinking what you said."

"That is correct," she replied, surprised.

"That's how you face your feelings. You revoke that block, you allow yourself to dig further. It's hard to do on your own, that's why people visit therapists. They can break that wall, and once it's broken, you can go think further. Once you've identified your feelings, you can face them."

"How?"

I shook my head.

"We aren't there yet. You have to break that wall."

Topa looked at the sand, then the water, and eventually turned her head to me.

"Alright," she said, full of resolve. "Will you be my therapist?"

I was taken by surprise by the question.

"Sure," I managed to utter. "I've never done it, but... I'll try."

"Thank you," she smiled. "So, how does it work?"

"How does what work?"

"Therapy."

I reflected on it for a moment.

"We... talk. You talk about your feelings, and I give you ideas of where to go, and we keep talking that way until something clicks."

Topa looked into the water again.

"I am sad," she eventually repeated.

"I know."

I sighed.

"Let's look at it logically for now," I suggested. "You told me you had no psychic powers because you didn't want me to learn them, right?"

Topa nodded.

"That means you are scared of me learning them."

"If you learn to use your powers, is there not a risk that you open the gate and also disappear?" she confirmed.

"Why would I do that?"

"I do not know. That... is how I feel."

She looked puzzled, almost lost, as if this exploring her feelings were completely new to her. I wasn't too sure where to go from there myself, and took time to think. It was obvious to me that she was being crushed by guilt, and her speech from when she told me about her son confirmed it, but it felt like she had completely forgotten about it.

"I think you're feeling guilty," I eventually said. "You think it's your fault. Your reasoning probably goes something like: if you hadn't

taught him to use his powers, he wouldn't have been able to open that gate."

She nodded.

"I am aware of that."

"You say you're aware, but do you accept it? To me, it feels like you're trying not to feel guilty."

"I do not understand," she admitted after a pause.

"You don't accept that you're feeling guilty, you're trying to convince yourself you aren't. There's nothing wrong with feeling guilty, but you have to face it. You have to accept that you think that's your fault. That doesn't mean it is your fault."

"Is it my fault?"

She looked at me with the saddest eyes I had ever seen, making my heart twist in painful sorrow. The guilt was eating her from the inside, and she was simply looking for redemption. She wanted me to say it wasn't, that she had done nothing wrong, and that I forgave her - but the important part was that she forgave herself, which she obviously wasn't ready to do. She had to learn to move on, and not be haunted by her son's death anymore, but I had no idea how to achieve that. I also needed to be extremely careful - one wrong word and I could send her directly back into depression; one she might possibly never come out of.

"I don't think so," I eventually replied, carefully choosing my words. "I don't think the fact your son could use his psychic powers was a factor at all. Given how upset he was, he would have found another way to exit the gardens."

I blinked, coming to a sudden realisation.

"Wait, how are you even certain he used his powers to open the gate himself? How can you tell there wasn't anyone that opened it for him, or that it wasn't already open?"

Her expression changed drastically as she understood the consequences of what I had just said.

"I do not know. We simply found the gate open, and I thought he opened it himself."

I frowned.

"I think you simply jumped to conclusions because of the shock. Also, this kind of proves my point, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"That it wasn't your fault."

She stared at me again, and I could see the sadness disappear from her eyes, being replaced by a form of hope I wasn't familiar with. All this time she had been suffering for no good reason, blaming herself by default because she had no alternative theory. However, her hope was short-lived and her eyes returned to the despair they were showing previously.

"I still am at least partially responsible, am I not?"

"Why?" I asked, genuinely surprised.

Topa remained silent for a minute.

"I am trying to think about it logically," she eventually replied. "If it turns out he did use his powers to open the door or the gate, then I am definitely responsible. If it is not the case, then I think I am to blame for his reaction."

"You weren't the one that sent him away," I corrected.

"No, indeed. He was scolded by Ma'am after trying to open the forbidden door, and ran away as a result. He had never been scolded before."

"Did you warn him against the door?"

"Yes, I did. I should probably have been more stern about it."

"So you feel like you failed to warn him properly?"

She looked at the floor, drowning in guilt, and nodded silently. I came up to her, licked her forehead, and hugged her.

"You've learnt from that, then. I won't get anywhere near that door."

She nodded, then opened her muzzle as if to speak, but couldn't, crying silently but trying to hide it from me. I looked her in the eye and licked her tear.

"Don't worry. One important part of facing one's feelings is learning from them. And you've obviously learnt from that one. You can forgive yourself. You're not going to make the mistake again."

"Is that what facing one's feelings means? To forgive oneself?"

"That's a part of it."

She frowned, thoughtful.

"Alright," she eventually whispered. "I forgive myself, then. I will not repeat the mistake."

Although she sounded convincing, I wasn't sure if she truly meant it. Time would tell, but for now, I was happy with the progress we were making.

"There is something else," she eventually confessed.

"Tell me."

"What if I was a bad mother?"

The question caught me by surprise. I had no idea what being a good mother meant, as I had never had trouble with mine, and I certainly didn't expect a fox to be asking that sort of question.

"Why do you think that?"

"He ran away instead of coming to me for comfort."

I had a hard time answering that one. I wasn't sure what to tell her to comfort her, as I understood her worry.

"You know, I don't think kids generally go to their mothers for comfort. When I was a kid, I went to my mother when I needed something from her, or when I was scared, for protection. When I was crying, I either sat in place or ran away from whatever made me cry. Also, if Ma'am was the one who made him upset, he was probably trying to get away from people he loved in general for fear that they would upset him more."

"That makes no sense to me," she replied.

"Think of it like this," I hazarded. "He went to the door, and possibly got scared. He was caught by Ma'am who started yelling at him. That would have definitely scared him, but it was a person he loved who scared him, when he was in need of protection."

Topa nodded.

"I understand so far."

"So... he would likely have tried to go to you first, but then changed his mind as he remembered Ma'am was yelling at him and he would be scared you would have as well. Then he'd simply be looking for somewhere to hide."

She nodded again.

"That makes sense. If he thinks he could not be protected, he would have been hiding."

"However," I kept explaining, "there was nowhere in the house or the gardens he could hide safely. Ma'am and you could have found him easily, and your scents were still all over the place, right? So he was constantly reminded of what was scaring him at the time."

There was a short silence, during which Topa stared at the water, thoughtful.

"He made the decision to get away from the mansion's limits because he thought he would not be safe in it?" she asked.

"Possibly, yes. Once he was outside, he probably hid somewhere until he calmed down."

"How did he make his way to the Glossy Forest then?"

"No idea. Instinct? Where do wild vulpix normally live?"

"I am not sure," she admitted. "My family has been domesticated for a very long time, and there are no wild vulpix around here."

"Either way, that one really isn't your fault. It's how kids react."

She nodded silently. It would take her some time to think it through, but I was hoping she'd get better eventually and be able to forgive herself.

"After he left," she continued, "he didn't show up until dinner. That was when Ma'am became worried and we searched the house and the gardens. As I said before, I had no trouble tracking him to the forest. And then, we found his slashed, bloody collar."

She seemed to have more composure than when she first told me the story, which was a good sign, but I could tell it was difficult for her.

"Ma'am simply... broke, at that point. It was like watching a balloon deflate. She lost all her energy and simply ordered us to go back to the mansion."

She shook her head.

"I wonder if we could have found him if we had insisted. Maybe we could have saved him."

I put a paw on her head.

"You can't think like that, Topa, that's not helping. If his collar was slashed, he was probably attacked at the neck. It takes a couple minutes to die from a neck wound. By the time you reached the forest..."

I stopped. I couldn't bring myself to say those words in front her.

"He would have been dead," she finished. "I understand, logically, but I cannot stop thinking about it. What if..."

I slapped the top of her head.

"Stop that! What ifs will never take you anywhere. They're the reason why you've been feeling so bad."

She stared at me, confused.

"Focus on what happened," I continued. "He was scared and upset, so he ran away. You don't know how he got past the gate, but he did, and found his way to the forest, where he was attacked."

I stopped to check on her reaction. She was still silently crying, but there was a flicker of defiance in her eyes that indicated she was actively listening and trying to fix her guilt issue.

"Also, the way I see it, even if by a stretch that was your fault, you've made amends for it."

"How do you mean?"

"The way to deal with guilt is by making amends, right? Well, you see... You felt guilty about not warning him properly about the door, but you warned me about it and I listened. You lectured me when I went to sniff it, but I never ran away, did I? I stayed with you.

And you've been amazingly good to me. Too good, even, to the point of hurting yourself. Even after I told you I was human you continued being kind to me and helping me with everything. You were..."

I hesitated as a knot formed in my stomach.

"... you are like a mother to me."

After a second of fighting herself, Topa broke down and started crying loudly, burying her head in my chest and scooping her whole body to be closer to mine. I laid by her side, covering what I could with my tails, and gently petted her, allowing her to cry to her heart's content. It was difficult for me not to join her in crying, but I felt like this was her moment and I had no right to intrude.

Trying to help her made me realise something. She and I had a lot in common, but for different reasons. By turning into a vulpix, I had lost everything, including all the things and the people I was holding dear. Topa also had lost everything she was holding dear - her son had died, and after that, the whole human family started acting more distant and would not allow themselves to grieve. Topa and I had both been starved for affection, and in spite of that, she had found the strength in herself to give me all the love I needed - I had simply been blind to it. It wasn't only Topa - Ilma, Pico, and even Pride to some extent, had been trying to be friendly to me, but I was pushing them away for fear that they might find out what I really was. On her side, Agnes was doing the same - carefully avoiding forming a proper relationship with me while I was avoiding forming a relationship with her.

I knew how to tackle the relationship issue I had with Agnes, but it would require being able to communicate efficiently with her. For the time being, however, I was simply cuddling with Topa, who was finally coming to terms with herself and allowing her emotions out. For the first time in many days, I felt like I was emotionally at peace, despite the problems I was about to face, and I was hoping Topa would feel the same. We had both gained something new from this situation, and most importantly, were both ready to accept it - a family.

Chapter 37

"You're being weird," Pride said.

It was the day after, a Tuesday, and Agnes and I had come to school even though we were supposedly off for a few days. The director had agreed to allow us to skip the rest of the week, saying that the classes were mostly physical training and Agnes was good enough at it to allow herself a break, and that he and Belish were looking for a way to help us with our relationship issues. Of course, Agnes wouldn't agree to take any breaks and came in anyway, but I didn't want to join her and she instead sent me to meet with Pride so he would keep teaching me telekinesis. We were back in the same clearing as before, behind the school, while everyone was in class.

"What?" I asked.

"You're being weird," he repeated. "I can tell you're really upset, but at the same time, you feel really happy and a lot more focused than last time."

"Um..."

I was hesitant to talk about it. Could a pokemon really help me with any of it? Then again, Topa had been tremendously helpful through my personal struggles ever since I woke up in this world, and Pride's relationship with his trainer seemed to be so much better than mine. Maybe he could indeed help.

"Relationship issues," I said.

"That would explain the upset part."

"Topa has been really depressed over the past few weeks but I think she's finally getting better."

"I see."

Pride sat down, staring at me thoughtfully.

"You've changed," he remarked.

"Huh?"

"Remember how distant and distrustful you were when we first met and in our first session? I felt like you would attack me if I said a word wrong. And now, you're actually talking to me."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "I simply noticed. The way I see it, I think you're less scared of others in general. You're starting to open up, maybe you can finally make some friends."

Although he looked happy for me, that last sentence felt like a sword through my heart. It implied that I had no friends, despite others trying to be friends with me, and I had been rejecting them, and it was spot on - painfully so.

I stared at him with anger.

"That's rude."

"I didn't mean it that way. I'm just saying that you feel like you're actively trying to avoid making friends with anyone, but at the same time, you really want to find someone to be friends with, so you have this weird contradicting behaviour where you'll respond to others being friendly, but not allow yourself to be friendly in return."

I was taken aback by the accuracy of that statement.

"Why?" he asked.

I didn't reply. I genuinely had no idea why I had been avoiding others so much. Although originally I simply didn't have the confidence to interact with other pokemon and I was scared of them finding out I was human, or used to be, it was no longer the case and I had

enough experience to comfortably interact with humans and pokemon alike. Yet, for some reason, I was continuing to shoo them away.

"Matters not," Pride eventually said, facing my silence. "I'm sure you'll work it out eventually."

I glared at him.

"You didn't ask about what was upsetting me," I noticed.

"You didn't mention it. I wouldn't prod - if anything, I find it rude to try and dig into other people's minds. If you're willing to talk about, I'm all ears, but I don't think I have the right to intrude and directly ask."

I remained silent. That was a strangely respectful position to be in for a pokemon, especially given how curious he had shown himself to be. It was more considerate than even Topa had been.

"I'll keep that in mind," I sighed.

I sat down as well, staring at the pebble between us.

"Have you made any progress on summoning energy outside of your body?" he asked.

"I figured out how I create it, I think," I replied. "I was wrong - the fire energy does come from my inner flame, like real fire. Then I simply move it into my muzzle and shoot."

"That's different from how I do things. But I don't know any fire-type moves, maybe that's the case for all of them. If I learn one, will I also get an inner flame?"

"I wonder. Maybe we could try."

"After you can use telekinesis, then," Pride replied with a smile, unable to contain his interest. "So, try summoning it around your body now."

"Well, I tried, but... I even tried using the energy that's around us, you know?"

"The one that protects you? You can't really control it."

I opened my muzzle to ask a question, but refrained. The question was a little too risky and might give away that I didn't know pokemon powers as well as I should.

"Alright," I eventually whispered. "Let me try something."

I closed my eyes and focused on my inner flame. I could feel it pulsating next to my heart, waiting quietly to be awakened. As I threw an Ember at the ground to liven it up, I immediately felt its power surge, and a now familiar excitement began filling me. I summoned another Ember but didn't throw it, trying to focus on what exactly I was doing to move the fire from the source of my power to my muzzle.

I couldn't feel anything that made it move. There were no muscles that I could feel, or no change in my inner flame. It simply moved. Summoning and swallowing back real fire a few times, trying to compare the movements, I could easily tell the difference in how my inner flame was reacting to real fire as opposed to unfire, but I felt like I did the same thing to move both types of fire to my muzzle.

I growled in annoyance, making Pride jolt.

"You're getting frustrated," he noticed.

"I can't do it!"

"Well, it's not supposed to be easy. Was learning to breathe fire easy to you? Just because you're a vulpix doesn't mean it will be."

I sighed. I was indeed extremely annoyed, but I refused to give up.

"Maybe we should stop for now and ask Pico," Pride suggested.

"Alright."

I didn't like the idea of taking a break or asking someone else until I had figured it out on my own, but there was no point in being too stubborn to ask for help. If Pico could help me make progress, I would be happy to ask him.

Another idea occurred to me as we were walking back to the school buildings, chatting casually. I stopped walking and Pride stopped shortly after, looking back at me with a hint of surprise in his wide eyes.

"I'm just going to ask Topa," I said.

"Why not Pico?"

"I... Topa's starting to feel better," I explained.

"Oh? That is great news. Are you hoping to keep that going?"

I nodded quietly.

"I want to spend more time with her," I said. "Doing anything, really. I think it will put her in a good mood if she gets to teach me something again."

Pride nodded in approval.

"Then I support your idea," he said with a gentle smile. "If we're not asking Pico, let's go play somewhere until our humans return."

I followed quietly, unsure what his idea of playing was. We walked a little deeper in the forest, and he explained to me that since I was still not confident about being touched, he simply wanted to play with our powers. The game would be similar to what I had done with Topa as Ember practice, but he would be flinging pebbles at me with telekinesis instead. One hit from his attacks would likely be enough to knock me out cold and he didn't want to hurt me. I agreed, somewhat excited, and we spent the rest of our time doing that.

"You're remarkably good," he said when we stopped after hearing our trainers calling for us.

"You didn't get hit once," I complained, wincing from all the pebbles that had managed to connect. "And you littered me with rocks."

"You dodged some," he replied with a smile. "That makes you better than almost every pokemon in this school."

I squinted at him, dubious. I doubted that he was so strong that nobody was able to dodge mere pebble throws, but again, he had quite the reputation and was evolved, so it was very much possible that he was among the strongest in the entire school.

"Right now, I would say your biggest flaw is that you only know one move. You should probably start learning new ones, preferably not fire-types."

"I'd like to," I replied, "but Topa won't teach me Will-O-Wisp."

"Maybe she would now that she's feeling better. I still think you should focus on telekinesis to begin with."

"Alright," I conceded, willing to take in any advice I got.

To my surprise, he gave me a genuine, friendly smile, but I was unable to return it. He didn't seem hurt, however, and suggested we return to our trainers, which I agreed to. We continued talking casually until we saw Agnes and Sean waiting for us. Pride ran to Sean and happily jumped into his arms, but I simply waddled to my human, who didn't even bother picking me up and simply petted me on the head. Pride noticed with a glance, but didn't say anything as he was being cuddled. Agnes and Sean parted ways and we returned to the car.

She remained completely silent and didn't even bother petting me as she was driving carefully back to the manor. I kept peeking at her with insistence every time the car stopped or slowed down, but she

kept her gaze focused on the road. She still smelled very upset, and rather sad, but wasn't showing any of it.

Without understanding why, I found myself brimming with anger. When the car stopped and Agnes opened the door, I jolted out of it, almost colliding with her legs, and ran directly to the door. She simply looked at me with empty eyes and carried on with what she had to do as I barked to the doorman to let me in, and stormed up the stairs to go to Topa's room.

"You are unusually worked up," she noticed, raising her head from her pillow.

I walked right up to her and buried my muzzle in her thigh, then released a frustrated groan as loud as I could.

"Agnes makes me mad," I complained.

"You never told me what made you so upset."

She raised her thigh to free my muzzle of it, then scooted slowly to deposit her head on my back with a smile.

"I don't want to bother you," I confessed.

"I appreciate that," she replied, pushing down on my neck.

I waited a few minutes, silently enjoying the cuddle and Topa's newfound peace. It was comforting to notice that she was no longer feeling depressed, although there was still some sadness in the way she behaved.

"Can we go to the practice room?" I asked.

"Sure. Do you want to play?"

I hesitated, remembering how insistent she had been to play with me. Was it too early to accept? Should I keep focusing on trying to

learn new moves as I had been, or was it time to start making concessions so she would feel better?

"I... I want to learn how to summon fire outside of my body," I suggested.

"That is for learning how to use telekinesis, is it not?"

Peeking at her, I was surprised to notice that she didn't seem as hurt as I would have expected her to be, although the lingering pain of her guilt was still visible in her features. She looked somewhat disappointed that I wouldn't play with her, but excited at the same time that I was still asking her for help in learning things. Unsure what to make of it and aware that it would be best not to lie, I nodded slowly with a hint of shame, but she just pushed her head against mine in a cuddly gesture.

"I will help you, then," she whispered, not as enthusiastically as I would have liked.

I failed to smile. Topa's lack of eagerness was contagious, and made me more worried than I probably should be, as I kept questioning my decision to refuse to play and keep insisting on my selfish desires. She was still the one who got up first and pushed me gently with her muzzle so I would follow, and we went to the training room together, Topa lifting me with the fur at the back of my neck to go down the stairs as usual.

"Alright," she said, sitting down by the door as I walked to the centre of the room. "What progress have you made so far?"

"I can't move my energy from my inner flame," I complained.

Canting her head to the side, Topa frowned at me with a mix of amusement and confusion.

"That is because you cannot," she replied. "The inner flame is only for real fire."

My eyes widened as I felt my tails fall to the floor with an almost comical muffled noise. That meant that all the effort I had made until this point was for naught - I had simply been doing things wrong.

"But... that's how I throw Ember," I complained.

"It is?" she replied with genuine surprise. "Can you describe to me how you summon one?"

"Well... I create unfire in my inner flame then I move it to my muzzle, roll it, and throw it?" I asked, suddenly unsure.

She canted her head to the other side.

"When I explained this process to you, I was trying to make it easier for you to learn, considering that was how you learnt how to throw fireballs. I did not mean it would be the final process."

"What should I do then?" I asked, confused.

"Switch your inner flame to battle mode."

I saw her smile as she pronounced those two words, remembering that it was the name I had candidly given to the state my inner flame was in when I was using unfire instead of real fire. Obeying without questions, I performed the switch, and felt the strange excitement for battle fill me again.

"Now, this is the hard part. Do you remember how you were creating the unfire?"

"No," I confessed. "I was just doing the same thing I did to breathe fire."

Her sudden expression of concern made my heart skip a beat as I realised that I was actually nowhere near as proficient with Ember as I thought. Standing still by the door, she was staring at the floor as if deep in thought, and I was standing in the centre of the room, looking at her impatiently, scared of what she might say.

"Try to imagine that your inner flame goes up into your muzzle," she suggested, "and throw another Ember."

Squinting dubiously at her, I obeyed despite my doubts. Closing my eyes to focus, I located my inner flame, somewhere around my heart, pulsating with this radiant energy that made me so excited. With my thoughts alone, I imagined this energy move up, slowly, travelling through my throat, giving me vibes of what happened when I moved unfire from my heart to my muzzle, then pictured it settle between my teeth, resting on the tip of my tongue like the fireballs I held in before throwing them. I could still feel the original, actual inner flame in its original position, but I had a strange feeling coming from where I imagined I had moved it. Frowning in hesitation, I created a fireball, keeping Topa's advice in mind.

I was surprised to feel it appear from my muzzle directly, as my inner flame sat idly by my heart, and spat it out. It was small and meagre, like my very first one, but had originated directly from my muzzle without me having to waste time creating fire, moving it up my throat, then rolling it into a ball, even though that whole process took less than half a second - as proven by my first two attempts at it, that much time could be victory or defeat in a battle.

"I think I did it," I said, opening my eyes to peek at her.

She was right next to me. Jolting in surprise, I sighed with a bit of embarrassment as she smiled, amused by my reaction.

"Practise it a bit when you have some time so you can throw Ember immediately," she suggested. "Just like you did when you were learning it."

I nodded. Having to essentially re-learn the attack was a bit of a bother, but I could understand the need for it - as I mentioned before, even half a second mattered in battles.

"You can do that later," Topa said with a kind smile as she noticed I started focusing again. "Now, try doing the same, but instead of

moving your inner flame to your muzzle, imagine it exiting your body."

"Am I really moving it?" I asked.

Chuckling lightly, she poked my head with her muzzle.

"Of course not. But you can control where you summon your energy by doing this."

"Alright," I replied, returning to my focus.

I repeated the exercise. Having never felt unfire travel from my heart to anywhere in my body except my throat and muzzle, it was a challenge for me to emulate what the feeling would be from other parts of it. Wondering for a moment where I should try to send it, I decided to move it backwards, towards my tails, as I tended to be very aware of them - even now, almost sixty days after I turned into a vulpix, the feeling of having tails was something always weighed on my mind, albeit in a positive, strangely comforting kind of way.

Travelling the inner fire sensation through my spine, I felt myself shiver as I remembered being hit by mud slap by Flick, and how painful that had been. For a first pokemon battle, I still believed I had done catastrophically, despite having had the upper hand for some time, and Belish lecturing Agnes and I so sternly had left a serious dent in my enthusiasm. However, part of why I was so adamant on learning new moves was to try and become stronger at battling, even though I was aware this would require serious work on my relationship with my trainer - and she was for the time being simply not willing to participate.

Although I was able to lead the unfire I felt to the tip of my tails - all of them - I was stumped as I felt a strange lock when I tried to push it further.

"I can't get it out," I complained.

"Where are you putting it right now?" Topa asked, walking around me as if to try to detect it on her own.

"My tails."

She finished her strange pacing behind me as I kept trying to force my inner flame through my fur, not looking at her. A sharp pain I was familiar with made me yelp in fear as I hopped forward, caught by surprise. Within my tails, the energy was gone, and I felt a lingering warmth at the tip of it.

"What did you do?" I whined, turning to Topa.

"I threw an Ember at your tails," she explained. "You can feel the energy surrounding your body, can you not?"

Squinting in confusion, I remained silent for a second, having forgotten about the energy that protected me from other moves, until I remembered my conversation with Pride and it came back to me.

"Yes," I nodded.

"It was protecting you," she continued, walking to me to put her head above mine in an apologetic gesture. "You have to disable it to let your energy go through."

A hint of frustration agitated me as I looked down at the floor, frowning. It made far too much sense for me to have been unable to figure it out on my own, and I started feeling unreasonably upset at myself, oblivious to the fact that I had completely forgotten about that energy's existence.

"Let me try again," I groaned, refusing to be defeated.

Focusing again, I repeated what I did before, trying to move my inner flame - or duplicate it - to the end of my tails. Although I met the same resistance as before, I tried to keep it as close to the fur as I could, and shifted my focus to try to detect my own protective

energy. I could feel it - it was there, unwavering, covering my entire body as a perfect sentinel, albeit diminished by Topa's attack. Concentrating on it, I commanded it to disappear, but it didn't bulge, stoic in its restless protection. My thoughts ventured back to what I was doing when I tried summoning the energy to fire an Ember, and I tried replicating the process in my mind, targetting the aura that surrounded me, but backwards.

"There you go!" Topa abruptly shouted with enthusiasm.

Turning to her, losing my focus completely, I blinked in surprise at her reaction.

"What did I do?" I asked.

"You summoned unfire outside of your body," she replied with a proud smile. "Try it again, but from a paw. Look at it."

Nodding docilely, I repeated the entire process without closing my eyes, trying to move the sensation to my paw instead. Focusing on my outer body again, I disabled my protection, and jolted in surprise when a flame burst out from my paw to spread over the floor - the same kind of fire that my Ember was made of.

"Wow," I mustered, unable to find words for what I had just done.

"You will need practice to be able to control this faster, but you are doing very well."

Although I knew I should feel proud for my results, something was amiss in my mind and I felt annoyed, almost frustrated.

"What is the matter?" Topa asked, quickly picking up on it.

It took me some time to formulate an answer.

"It was easy," I complained.

"I... fail to see why that makes you so annoyed," Topa replied, frowning in confusion.

"When I was learning Ember it took me what, four days, to be able to even start summoning the right energy. And now... I manage to do this new thing in just half an hour."

"You are getting better," Topa said with a comforting smile. "I did say that learning more moves would become easier. This is especially true for moves you share a type with. Since manipulating their energy is natural to you, it is only a matter of knowing what to do with it. Besides, it will take you some time to learn to control it well enough to be able to learn Flame Charge."

Looking down at the floor, I didn't feel any of my frustration leave, but my annoyance was replaced with confusion. I understood her reasoning, but it didn't feel that way to me. Up until this point, I had no idea how to manipulate energies at all - and within a very short time, I had figured out how to displace the source of my unfire, how to disable my protection, and how to push energy through my body, even though I had spent a week trying to figure that out on my own and I had miserably failed. This felt wrong to me, almost unnatural - nobody should learn this easily.

"You might not like this statement," Topa hesitated, "but I think you are becoming much better at being a vulpix."

Did that mean anything to me? I could still vividly remember every minute of the first days I spent as a vulpix, my anxiety in the hospital, my attempts at calming myself by trying to explore and understand my body, and over the next few weeks, how much Topa had done to help me feel at ease, how she had accepted me instantly despite my being a transformed human, and how much time she had spent helping me learn about everything I needed to know, being supportive and kind when I needed it. And now, two months after that, I was spending my time trying to hone my powers and thinking about how to fix my relationship with my trainer, while trying to work with Topa to help her overcome her own issues, and being upset

about my results in pokemon battles, being perfectly fine with the behaviour I had ended up with, despite how scared I had been of losing my humanity.

"Thank you," I replied with a genuine smile.

Surprised by my reaction, Topa opened her muzzle as if to say something, but she simply smiled and walked to be, laying by my side, opening her tails for me to dive in. I laid against her thigh, covered by her pretty fur, and gently pushed my head against her muscle in an enjoyable cuddle. In the end, my situation wasn't so bad anymore. Maybe she was right, so many days ago, when she said there was nothing wrong with what had happened to me. Maybe I was fine with becoming a vulpix.

Chapter 38

"Amazing," Pride whispered with genuine stupefaction.

It was Wednesday. Once again, Agnes had come to school so she wouldn't miss on physical classes, and I was spending time with the espeon. I had just shown him the new power I had learnt - summoning energy onto my paws directly - and he seemed surprised with my advancement.

"You're progressing quite fast," he noted, confirming my thoughts. "I would have expected this to take you a few days."

"Topa helped me," I confessed, not wanting to be complimented without giving her the credit she deserved. "She explained to me how to do it, so I just practised."

Sitting next to me as the unfire vanished from my limbs, the espeon nodded thoughtfully.

"You're dedicated," he said, smiling to me. "This will get you far. Tell me, is Topa happy again?"

I squinted suspiciously at him, surprised that he would ask a personal question - even more so because it wasn't about me.

"Why do you ask?"

Blinking rapidly towards me, he canted his head to the side slightly, seemingly not expecting me to ask that kind of thing, or unsure what to reply.

"You brought it up yesterday," he replied in a candid tone, as if he didn't understand why I had questioned him. "You said that Topa was finally getting better and it made you happy. So I'm asking because I want to know if you're happy."

I blinked several times, confused, touched, and lost. That was a strangely friendly thing to do that I wouldn't have expected out of him, especially not given with how much detachment he had stated it. Did he genuinely care, or was he simply asking because he knew my state of mind would be affecting my performance?

"I don't think she's fully recovered yet," I admitted, thinking back about her reaction to my still refusing to play fighting with her. "But she's getting there."

"Good!" he replied with genuine enthusiasm. "What about your relationship issues? Are you making progress on that?"

I shook my head slowly, lowering it in shame, not even bothering to ask why he suddenly had the guts to question me on it when he had mentioned just the day before that he found it rude to prod into people's personal lives. I hadn't made any form of progress - or even effort - with Agnes and she was still withdrawn to the point where I couldn't read her mood at all. I didn't know what to do.

Looking up at Pride who was patiently looking at me expecting a reply, I remembered how perfect his relationship with his trainer seemed to be and found myself wondering if he would be able to help me. Even though he was a pokemon, he seemed to be quite intelligent and was brutally honest - something that could be helpful in making me determine what I was doing wrong with my trainer, even if his statements might be hurtful. Ultimately, being upset or offended by him was worth the pain if it helped me fix my friendship with Agnes.

"I feel like Agnes doesn't see me as a friend," I abruptly confessed.

Pride sat on his haunches.

"If you want my take on it, I don't think she should. You should be family to her. That's how I feel towards Sean."

"She's human," I replied. "She can't think of an animal as family."

My heart skipped a beat when I realised what kind of statement I had just made. That was me I was talking about, as an animal. I saw myself as one, and it hurt me that Agnes also did.

"Of course she can. Not all humans do, however. I hope Agnes is one who does, otherwise you're going to have a miserable relationship with her unless you decide to see her as a work partner and not your family."

"I don't want to see her as a work partner. I love her."

I immediately started tearing up as I said that. The confession was a shock to me, for I wasn't sure myself whether or not it was true, and the way my heart had faltered as I said those words had proven to me that I did love Agnes. The fact she didn't love me back abruptly became too difficult for me to bear and I flopped onto my belly, laying my ears and tail in defeat. Pride walked up to me and laid by my side, depositing his head above mine.

"Do you show her your affection?"

"What?"

"Humans don't really show affection towards their pets. They just pet us sometimes, but they seldom initiate. They're very receptive to what we do, however. Be more forward with your trainer and show her that you love her."

"What should I do?"

"Do you two ever cuddle?"

I shook my head and Pride removed his as a reaction.

"Essentially never. I'm not allowed to lick her and I can't go to her room. I never get to sleep with her. I stayed with her a few times on the couch but never on her."

"You're not allowed to what? Why are you staying in a house that forbids you from expressing love?"

"They don't forbid us!" I hurriedly replied. "It's just... I don't know if I can."

Pride's face furrowed in a strangely amusing frown as he openly expressed his disapproval, and I lifted my chin to look at him.

"Does Topa cuddle with her trainer? It's not Agnes, right?"

"No, Topa belongs to Agnes' little sister."

"Belongs?"

He stood up and sat, staring at me with anger.

"Ruby, that's a horrible place you're staying in. That mindset is not healthy."

I laid my head down again. I had never actually thought about it, being too focused on the situation going on between my body and my mind. How good a situation was I in when it came to the family I lived with? I knew Agnes' parents were rich beyond measure, but how much did that affect us? I had never seen Topa play or cuddle with Melissa. She spent all of her time with me. Had my arrival made her withdraw from her trainer, or was that the normal way for them to behave? What if Agnes wasn't actually avoiding me, but simply acting on her upbringing and staying away from her pet? What if she wanted to see me as more than a pet, but the silent laws her parents had taught her as they raised her made it impossible for her?

"What should I do?"

"Seek affection. Start enforcing cuddles, ask to play, spend more time with Agnes. Try to get into her room if she lets you, and sleep with her. If she doesn't, sleep by the door. You need to let her know you love her and want to be loved back."

He smiled and chuckled lightly, his eyes moving to a distant focus that I couldn't see.

"You'd be surprised how much sleeping with your human will do to your mood. Do you at least cuddle with Topa?"

I nodded.

"All the time. We often sleep together, too."

"Good! At least you're not going without affection."

A quiet sigh escaped my muzzle. "I want to cuddle with Agnes."

"I understand that. If you want it, then you have to ask for it. It's possible your human just doesn't know you want cuddles and is still scared of being too affectionate because of your wound."

I wasn't so sure about that. She knew I had recovered from the wound with virtually no long-term consequences

"Alright," Pride said. "Telekinesis."

He got up and walked around to find a stone that he brought me.

"I'm not sure if there are fire-type moves that summon energy away from your body, so we'll have to drop that side of things for now. Do you remember the three things I mentioned about learning telekinesis?"

I nodded. I wasn't too good at summoning energy outside of my body yet, but Pride seemed to be happy with what I had managed to do and was willing to start working on the next step.

"We'll start working on summoning the right energy now. If you've never done anything of the sort, this might be difficult, but it's a form of energy you should be familiar with as a vulpix, so there's a chance it is easier than I expect, especially given how good you've been at learning new things."

There was a bit of enthusiasm in his voice that I did not share. I didn't think of myself as particularly good at learning anything and I was sure he was complimenting me to try to get me going, but I felt ashamed and scared of disappointing him.

He peered at the pebble and his eyes glowed the eerie blue light that indicated he was using his psychic powers. As he hovered it towards me, I became acutely aware of what kind of energy surrounded the rock, something that had never happened before.

"I can feel it," I said. "Much better than before."

"That's good. I doubt you can replicate it yet, but try to get an idea of how it is."

"I don't know how to create other kinds of energy."

"I think Topa will be better in helping you with this than I. For now, try to take in as much of it as you can. You need to get used to how this feels before you are able to replicate it."

I nodded and focused on the energy I felt as the pebble hovered around me in regular circles, trying to identify what exactly it was and how it differed from unfire energy. As I was beginning to make some progress, the distant voices of Agnes and Sean interrupted our training.

"That will have to be it for today, I fear," Pride said. "Rest on it, we can continue tomorrow."

He led me back to our trainers who were just done eating. In spite of her depressed state of mind, Agnes was not showing any signs of being down, and greeted us with enthusiasm when we emerged from the trees. Pride's advice resonated in my head as I walked, and I ended up running to her, my tails wagging slowly, and jumping in place by her legs.

"Someone's in a good mood!" Agnes said. She picked me up and held me against her cheek. "I take it you're having fun with Pride?"

I barked joyfully for a reply, earning myself a few pets on the head.

"I got a text saying that the director and doctor Belish want to see us," she said. "Do you want to go now, or do you want to wait a bit?"

The espeon couldn't repress a happy smirk as I turned to him with confusion. It was the first time Agnes had asked for my opinion on what we were going to do. I turned to her and nodded with resolve as a reply.

"Alright," she chuckled, depositing me back on the ground. "Let's go, then. Thank you, Pride."

The espeon barked politely, and we took our leave towards the director's office.

"Come in," his voice called from the other side of the door after Agnes knocked.

As before, she pushed me to let me in first, then walked in and closed the door behind me. To my surprise, she stiffened up, tapping her right heel into her left one as her hand snapped with surprising accuracy into a military salute. Still unsure what to do, I adjusted my position to be slightly behind her, on her right, and sat down, keeping my head high and my torso slightly bumped.

"At ease."

The director was sitting behind his desk. Surprisingly, his absol was absent, but his spot was taken by someone I wouldn't have expected to see: Ilma. Doctor Belish was sitting at the round table, his back turned to the large window of the room.

"Take a seat, Agnes," he said, gesturing to a chair facing him.

She bent over to pick me up and obeyed, pulling the chair away from the metallic table to deposit me on her lap. Under the main desk, Ilma quietly nodded in satisfaction. After picking up a stack of paper sheets from a drawer, the director joined Belish.

"Ease up," Belish said. "We're not going to yell at you."

"I see you're following my advice of taking the week off," the director said.

"I'm working on something to fix my situation," Agnes replied, tensing up further. "Until that is fruitful, I thought it would be better to keep training."

"Has Ruby had a word in this decision?"

"No, sir."

Her voice had faltered in shame as she said that. I was surprised to notice that she hadn't tried to make any excuses and directly admitted to something she knew was wrong. Standing on my trainer's lap, I barked with resolve.

"She agrees with me," Agnes said. "I realise I should have asked her for her opinion."

"It's good that you do. What is it you're working on?"

"I will move out of my parents' place and get my own."

There was a silence during which Belish and the director peeked at each other, confused, but my heart fell into my feet.

Topa. If Agnes were to move out, I wouldn't get to be with her anymore, and she needed me more than ever now that she was starting to get better. If I were to leave, she would have to face her son's departure all over again, and she wouldn't recover from it.

"That is a surprising decision," Belish said. "What led to it?"

"I..." she began fiddling with her fingers. "I think you are right, doctor. Ruby is my partner, I shouldn't let my parents dictate how I live my life with her. They have the right to set their own rules in their house, so if they don't let me be with Ruby how I want, I will have my own house with my own rules."

"Drastic, but not wrong. I'm surprised by your objectivity in this."

"Truth be told... I want to do more with her. I want to have her with me when I'm sleeping or exercising. I kept my distance at first because I wanted to give her the time she needed to get used to her new situation and to recover from her wound. Then I noticed how much better Topa was doing because she was around and thought it would be in her best interest to let her have all of Ruby's attention. They spend their days together, and they're both happy. I didn't want to intervene and let Topa fall back into depression."

"Hold on," Belish said. "I know who Topa is, but I wasn't aware she had gone through depression."

"She..." Agnes put a hand on my head and began scratching me. "Topa lost her kit a few years back. He was just a year old. She's changed a lot since. She really took her son's death harshly, and Ruby's presence is doing her a lot of good."

So Agnes had noticed Topa's reaction to the death of her son. Why had she not done anything about it?

"I think Topa's recovered to a point where I can start spending time with Ruby. I'd rather not have to take her away, but my parents might be forcing my hand."

"How will you tackle this process?"

"I have found an apartment I'm holding onto. I'll have a conversation with my parents first."

"Will Ruby be with you for it?"

Agnes lowered her eyes to peer at me. "No, sir. I don't think it's fair to subject her to hearing my mother yelling at me. This is something I have to do alone. I need to take responsibility."

Belish and the commissioner peeked at each other again, but I couldn't decipher their facial expressions.

"Alright," the latter said. "It looks like you're actually taking our criticism to heart, which I'm thankful for. You're working to rebuild your relationship with your partner. About that... we discussed the situation with doctor Belish and we have an idea that should help you two get closer."

He marked a pause.

"We're listening," Agnes said.

"Since your physical results are unprecedented, we allowed you to take this week off to mend your relationship with her, so we want to capitalise on that and offer you your own... exam of sorts. Essentially, a couple days hiking and camping, with Ruby only, so you can start bonding without any rules stopping you from doing what you want. As weird as that sounds, the isolation might do you two some good."

"I like the idea. My family owns a lake we go to every month. It's private property, so we should be undisturbed."

"We would rather you spend those two days moving and walking together, not staying in one place," Belish said. "The goal isn't for you to ignore each other in the same tent instead of in the same house. You need to be exercising and having fun together."

"We'll take a large path and stop there for one night, then."

"That is acceptable."

"We want you to sketch your travel plans today," the commissioner said. "You will present them to us tomorrow, and if we approve, you'll leave on Saturday morning and return home on Sunday evening. You won't have classes on Monday but you'll have a debriefing with us."

"Understood."

"Your conversation with your parents should be delayed until you return," Belish said. "Focus on the coming trip and don't stress yourself."

"Understood."

Belish stood up.

"That will be all," he said. "Go home and start working on this, and on your relationship with Ruby."

Agnes remained seated and nodded. My eyes turned to Ilma, who had stood at the same time as her trainer, but she didn't spare me a glance before both of them left.

My heart sank, but Agnes' hand caressing the top of my head stopped it from dropping too much. Pushing myself into it, I inadvertently let out a sad chirp.

"She likes Ilma a lot," Agnes said.

"Indeed. Don't tell Belish I said that, but I think that's good for Ilma. They have work to do, so they can't stay too long."

"I understand."

Her hand slipping onto my chest startled me slightly, but I didn't protest as she lifted me, then hoisted me onto her shoulder.

"I will report tomorrow with our trip plans."

"Good. Dismissed."

Agnes simply nodded again, and left the room.

"Try summoning energy outside of your body," Topa said.

After coming home, Agnes had given me another kiss, then deposited me in Topa's room where the ninetales was sleeping, saying that she needed to warn her parents of her incoming trip, and that she wanted me to spend some time with the ninetales before we looked at what to do.

I obeyed, focusing on the layer of protection around my body, then creating a puddle of unfire around my front paws.

"You are faster at this already."

"I practiced a little more today," I said.

"That is very good. Today, I am going to teach you a new move."

I knew it wouldn't be Will-O-Wisp, but I still couldn't contain my excitement. Having another move in my arsenal would open up a lot of new strategies for Agnes, and might help with my confidence problems. More importantly, once I knew a few moves, Topa would finally teach me the one I wanted to learn.

"There are a lot of ways you can use what you just learnt. You can coat your claws or teeth in unfire. That enables you to use scratching and biting in battles, as the unpowers will stop your claws and fangs from actually touching your opponent. However, it is not the main way this is used. What we generally do is coat our entire bodies in unfire, and lunge ourselves at our opponents. Humans call this move Flame Charge."

I nodded to signify I had understood. In the games, this move also raised the user's speed. How would that translate into this world?

"It is a very useful skill to close in," Topa said. "Also, it helps make you more alert, and the unfire surrounding your limbs will make you faster."

"Does that speed boost stay?"

"For a time only, but it is very convenient. Vulpix is a fairly frail pokemon, and that speed will allow you to dodge attacks more effectively."

"Okay. How do I do it?"

"The first step is surrounding your body with unfire. Try it. Do not disable all of your protection. Let the fire surround you from a few exit points. You will find that you are able to control your unfire quite well if it is close to your body."

I nodded, focusing on the energy outside of my body again. Creating a small opening was an easy task now, but I found myself unable to create several.

"I can't make several."

"I struggled with that the most as well. A trick that my mother taught me and that helped was that once you have created an opening, you do not need to focus as much to maintain it. Your protection will close itself if you do not keep it open, but you can spare only a bit of focus for that. Try creating two openings for your front paws first, then covering them in unfire."

I nodded again, and as I was about to try, there was a knock at the door. Agnes peeked in.

"Sorry for interrupting you," she said. "Ruby, it's time to make plans."

Topa peeked at me with confused eyes.

"Police school wants us to go on a trip to mend our relationship," I quickly explained.

"Ah, I see. That is a good idea. I will be by the stream, then."

I frowned, mildly confused as well. Topa had never bothered telling me where she was going. She wanted me to join her.

I nodded to signify I had understood what she wanted, then rushed towards Agnes, my tails wagging slowly. The prospect of the trip was exciting, and having to make plans meant I had a chance to cuddle with her, or at the very least stay on her lap again.

She welcomed me with a smile and a pet. Topa also walked to her to get a few pets of her own, then left for the garden. Agnes picked me up, kissing my cheek, and dodged my tongue as I tried licking her in retaliation.

"Let's go somewhere quiet."

She carried me out into the main hall, then through the stairs, and turned right to go to the rooms. Holding me with one hand, she opened the door to hers. Holding the top of my head as I struggled to get down, knowing I wasn't allowed into human rooms, she endeavoured to scratch the tuft of hair between my ears.

"Don't worry," she said.

After kissing me yet again, she stepped into her room, with me secured in her arms.

Chapter 39

Her room was huge.

Despite its odd triangular shape, it worked surprisingly well as a room. The door was close to the wall on our left, and most of the room was lost to our right, hidden by a white folding wall that was currently fully drawn and leaving a door-wide space by the opposite wall to walk through. Walls were kept an almost blinding white colour especially given the powerful lights scattered across the ceiling, but the floor was made of dark blue carpet that smelled suspiciously clean. The only wall that was completely filled with furniture was the one that had the entrance and extended to my right, hidden behind a row of large and tall cupboards that probably contained her clothes and ended right up against the folding wall.

Agnes walked me to the opening between the folding wall and the one facing the entrance. There were only two windows regularly spaced on the third wall in front of me, both of which were open with dark blue curtains drawn, letting in a comfortable mix of fresh summer air and the soft dim of a sun that was about to set. Between them was a piece of furniture that looked like a desk, with a cloth chair pushed under it and a large mirror standing against the wall that went along the corridor, as well as towers of drawers to its sides under the windows. Behind the folding wall was her computer desk that completed the long row of furniture I had noticed before, with a desktop tower and enormous monitor currently turned off, and a ridiculously large bed with crimson sheets comfortably stuck in the furthest corner from the door. Between the bed and the desk was a windowed cupboard with various gemstones on display, both cut and raw, and more storage space. There didn't seem to be any signs of a bathroom anywhere. If Topa's room had one, why did Agnes' not? Where did Agnes have showers?

I struggled to get out of Agnes' arms.

"It's okay, Ruby," she whispered. "My father allowed this. We'll be undisturbed here."

She still knelt to put me on the floor, keeping a hand gently pressing my back to let me know she was with me.

I wanted to go explore. From where I was, I could only smell Agnes' scent, and some faint remnants of cleaning products and maids, but I wanted to scan every square metre of the room. This was my greatest chance to learn about my human. I was allowed in because she and I needed to be alone to plan a trip, but after that, I had no reason to think I would continue being allowed into her room.

"I'll let you explore a bit," she said. "Come to me when you're done, okay? Don't run out, we need to plan this trip."

She went to her bed and sat on it, watching me as I insecurely began scanning the room with my muzzle. I was surprised to realise that the only scents I could detect were from maids or Agnes herself. There was nothing, not even traces, of any of her family members.

A noise of paper coming from the bed caught my attention and my head snapped to it. Agnes was looming over something, and I walked up to her, barking as I reached the foot of the bed. She peeked over the edge with a smile.

"I give you permission to hop onto the bed," she said. "Let's plan the trip."

It took me a few attempts to successfully jump up. It was the first time I had ever jumped onto something in this body, and I wasn't too sure how to do it, but it didn't take me longer to understand the correct process. What did take me a while was properly calculating the height and trajectory to land on the bed. Once I successfully hopped on, I waddled happily towards my trainer, tails wagging, and laid onto her crossed legs.

"You're getting better," Agnes said. "You've never jumped onto something this high."

She ruffled the top of my head as if to congratulate me, and for a split second, I was in a state of euphoria so deep I forgot what I was doing and why I was in Agnes' room. Being on her lap in the middle of her bed being petted was the happiest I could have been.

She snapped me out of my felicity by tapping a large sheet of paper laid before her. It was a map of the area.

"This is our house," she said, pointing to the centre. She then pointed to the top-right corner, below which was a large watery area. "This is the lake we went to, and further in this direction is the White Hat. You've probably seen it, it's the only mountain that has snow on it."

I barked with joy as a reply, but it was difficult for me to conceal my excitement. After petting me again, Agnes' hand slid over the large manor, then to the left.

"Here are the Glossy Hills," she said. "And the Gloss Forest. Technically, the forest that's around the house is part of the Gloss Forest, but since it's never been observed to have the weird lights, we don't really call it that. The part that is referred to as Gloss Forest is southwest of here, and the rest of the forest doesn't really have a name."

Her face became dark as she lowered her eyes onto me. "There were lights the night I found you, almost to the very edge of the forest. I remember the way they reflected on your fur and on..." She choked. "I might have never found you were it not for them. I wonder if you've seen them from up-close."

I lowered my head as well. What if I had? What if those lights were responsible for what happened to me?

Then, why had there not been more victims? And how had police not made the connection to the forest until they found that new body that Agnes and I had been taken to?

"Where do you want to go?"

Agnes was looking at me with a smile, holding the map laid out before her. I wasn't sure if I was actually supposed to answer. Before that, she had never asked for my opinion. At best, she would warn me that something was about to be unpleasant. Was this part of the efforts she made to mend our relationship?

I walked around the map towards the top-right corner, and intently tapped the very end of the paper with a paw. Agnes frowned towards me.

"You want to go to the lake again?"

I violently shook my head, then tapped the map again before stepping out of it and tapping the bed.

"You want to go to the White Hat?"

I nodded with enthusiasm, and Agnes dragged me back onto her lap.

"I'm sorry, Ruby, but we can't. It's more than a day away and we only have a weekend. Also, it's illegal to step onto the snow. We need another itinerary. Is there anywhere else you want to go?"

I let out a deep sigh in an effort to hide my disappointment, but Agnes simply petted the top of my head with another apology and let me go so I would pick another place to go. Looking over the map, my eyes stopped upon the house for a long time, particularly on its left side, as if I would be able to pierce the mystery of the forbidden corridor through a topographical reconstruction of the building.

Maybe... there was another mystery I could pierce.

I waddled over the map, heartlessly stepping onto the house, and stopped on its left side in the forest. Staring my trainer in the eye, I tapped the trees just once.

"You want to go to the Gloss Forest?" Agnes asked, her voice raising in pitch.

I nodded with resolve.

"I... don't understand why. That place is dangerous. It might have been closed by police. Why do you want to go back there?"

I sat where I was, hesitating. I wasn't even sure why I wanted to go there, but something in my gut told me that I needed to. I was certain the place was linked to the attacks, and this trip might be a chance for me to investigate the strange lack of smell Ilma and I had noticed. Agnes was right, however, in thinking that it was dangerous.

"We can go," Agnes said. "I'm not sure the school will let me, but we can try. If they allow me to go, it can't be that dangerous, so we'll be safe, and we can deal with whatever danger there is together, right? Come here."

I jumped onto her lap, my tails wagging happily, and nested in her legs, looking at the map. She remained motionless for a few minutes.

"Here's what I suggest," she finally said. "We'll go west immediately after leaving, so we won't go to the hike trail this time. We can follow the edge for a bit, then go deeper." She tapped on the map. "We should reach this point in the afternoon, and then we can start walking towards the lake. We'll camp in the forest and just take some time the next day to bathe, then we can go home in the evening. How does that work for you?"

The idea of camping in a possibly haunted forest terrified me to the point of visibly shuddering, but I liked Agnes' plan. We had a chance to spend quite some time inside the forest, at the very least enough

for me to investigate, and staying at night meant we would likely see the lights, maybe even figure out what they were. I wasn't sure where the last body from the attacks had been found, but it was unlikely we would be allowed to go back to the crime scene, assuming it was even still open to the public. This was my best shot to get a good look into the cursed woods.

I looked up at my trainer as she peered at me with a patient smile, and extended my neck to lick her nose.

She threw her head backwards with a giggle, gently pushing on my muzzle to make sure I wouldn't try to lick her again.

"I take it you like my idea, then?" I nodded to confirm. "Perfect. We'll present this to the commissioner tomorrow. If they refuse to let us go into the forest, we can walk along the edge of where the lights appear and camp at the lake, okay?"

I nodded again, and she softly pushed me off of her lap.

"Alright." She let out a weary sigh. "I have to talk to my parents now about my plans to move out. This won't be fun, and I would rather you not be with me. Mom is going to yell at me for sure. I'll come fetch you when we're done, okay?"

My head lowered itself as I tried imagining how sad Agnes would be while being yelled at by her mother for wanting more independence in her relationship with me, and it took me some time to nod weakly. Hopping onto the floor, I followed my trainer outside of her room until she locked it and carried me downstairs, depositing me by the training room before leaving. Once she was out of sight, I barked towards a passing maid to allow me out, and joined Topa at the stream.

"Hello," she said with a smile.

As usual, she was laying on the sand, pawing idly at the water. I walked towards her and laid by her side.

"You wanted to talk to me, didn't you?" I asked.

"I did."

She brought her paw back to her, folding it under her body, and let out a deep sigh.

"I have been thinking. About my feelings."

"Tell me?"

She remained silent for a few seconds.

"I think we were wrong. My problem is not that I feel guilty for my son's death. I am... ashamed."

"Why? You've done nothing for which you should be ashamed."

"I am ashamed because I do not feel guilt for his death."

"What?"

She sat up, looking at me with as much resolve as she could muster.

"Do you remember the first time I talked about my son? You told me I was not responsible for what happened, and I said I knew."

"But... On Monday, you told me you felt guilty."

"I thought I did. I convinced myself I did. When we talked about facing feelings and you told me I had no reasons to believe I was responsible, it made me think. I am sad that my son died, but I do not feel guilty for it. I... created a narrative for myself where I felt guilty for his death because I thought I had to be. I thought it would be wrong of me not to be. Maybe that is why I was unable to face it before, I was trying to break a wall that never existed."

She shook her head.

"As I said before, guilt is irrational, but all of my excuses for feeling guilty were very rational. That he ran away because of me. That he managed to open the portal because I taught him telekinesis. It is logically sound, and that means that those excuses are not born of guilt. I created them to justify guilt I did not have. Do you remember how you felt towards your transformation at first? You thought you were being punished. You felt guilty for it, but no matter how much we talked, you never managed to explain why."

"I remember. I was being dumb, I'm sorry."

I didn't agree with my own statement. I wasn't being dumb, but Topa needed the reassurance, and I didn't care about my own feelings. I only cared about helping her.

"No. You were feeling guilty. If I were truly feeling guilty for my son's death, I would not be able to justify why."

She marked a pause again. I wasn't certain I agreed with her view of guilt, but I understood how not feeling guilty for her son's death would lead to shame.

"So I wondered... If my problem is not that I feel guilty for my son's death, then what is it? I think the issue is exactly that I do not have guilt. When you told me his death was not my fault, I did not feel soothed. I felt relieved. It took me some time to understand why, but I believe I felt relieved because it meant I did not need to force myself to feel guilty if it was not my fault. I no longer needed to punish myself."

"Maybe you just came to terms with your guilt?" I asked.

"No, I now firmly believe I never had any to begin with, and I simply forced myself to feel guilty because I thought I needed to. That is what I am ashamed of."

Her head turned away from me and she sniffed loudly.

"When you were human, did you have children?"

"No, I... let's just say I never got with anyone."

"Your life changes completely when you have a child. Your entire existence becomes dedicated to it. You feed it, educate it, protect it. Nothing else matters until your child becomes independent. I was right when I said I was a bad mother, but not because my child did not come to me when he was scared. I am a bad mother because I failed at being one."

"Topa, you..."

She shook her head to silence me.

"I came to an upsetting realisation yesterday," she said. "While you were working on summoning unfire. I was thinking about what you said the day before, and something clicked. I realised that I loved you."

My heart skipped a beat when she said that.

"The issue is... I did not love my son. I did at the start, but I stopped when he began pulling away from me. I think I did not love him because he did not love me. He only loved Ma'am. I resented her for taking my child away from me, and I resented him for letting it happen."

"I don't understand," I said. "Now you're saying that you don't feel guilty for your son's death, and all you've said today is about being a bad mother. Is that what you're shameful of? Does that mean his death didn't affect you?"

"No, it did affect me. I am saying that we were wrong about me feeling responsible for it."

She sniffed loudly and turned her head to face me.

"How does one deal with shame?"

It took me a long time to formulate an answer. I didn't want to admit I didn't know, and most importantly, I was trying not to cry. I had understood that Topa had been suffering alone for years, but I was wrong on how much she really was hurting. Yet, in spite of her pain, she had the strength to care for me as if I were her new kit.

She had the strength to love me.

"I think it's the same," I eventually replied. "Shame is... pathological inwards guilt. Guilt is about feeling bad about something that happened, and shame is about feeling bad about something with yourself. You're saying you feel shame for not loving your son."

"I understand."

I couldn't repress a broken smile.

"You know, I can relate to what you're saying, in a way. When I was human, I had a little sister eight years younger than I. I was ecstatic when she was born, I wanted to be a strong big sister and take care of her. Except... I quickly realised that my parents had stopped giving me any attention. Everything was about her, and because she was a baby, she required a lot of time. So I decided I hated her. I would purposely make her cry just to get that tiny bit of attention from my parents when they rushed in and asked me what had happened, or when they were yelling at me for doing something bad. It was the only way they would pay attention to me."

"That is sad."

"You know what is even worse? My little sister loved me with all her soul. It didn't matter how many times I made her cry or I was bad to her, she came back to me and she wanted to spend time with me, but I was blind to it."

"Were you ashamed of it?"

I nodded, tears filling up my eyes.

"For her sixth birthday, my parents hosted a small party with her friends from kindergarten. I actually behaved well that day, because as much as I told myself I hated her, I didn't want to ruin her birthday, but I still kept my distance. In the evening she walked into my room and she gave me all of the presents she received. She said that she loved me and didn't understand why I didn't love her, so she would give me all her presents until I did because I was more important to her than her birthdays."

My tears forced me to take a break as I focused on myself to stop crying.

"I cried a lot that night. I was ashamed of my behaviour. That was when I understood that she wasn't responsible for the situation and I was punishing her while she didn't deserve it. So I made myself the promise I would be the best sister I could be."

"Were you?"

"I think I was. I stopped acting up against her. I gave her the love she wanted, and she was immensely happy, but my relationship with my parents took a bit of a sour turn because I understood that they were the ones responsible and I turned my resentment to them. We've mended our relationship since, but there's still a lot of hurt that remains."

My thoughts were locked on my sister. What had happened to my body back in my first world? Had I died? If so, how had she reacted? Was she holding up? If not, was she aware that I was gone? Would she ever know?

"Are you saying that my resentment is misplaced?"

"No, in your case, I think you are not wrong. Your son was the one pulling away from you while you loved him, like I pulled away from my sister while she loved me. What I'm trying to say is that to deal with shame, you need to make amends, like with guilt. They're the

same process but with different targets, right? So the healing process should also be the same."

"That does make sense. Then, how do I make amends for this?"

"You already have."

I stood up from my laying position and walked to her, nesting into her tails. She covered me with them and nested around me without hiding her surprise.

"I see," she said.

Maybe this could be healthy for more than Topa. The way she could make amends for her failed relationship with her son was to renew her love, but for me. Similarly, this was my chance to go back to childhood and have a normal one, with at least one parent who loved me and paid attention to me, except not as a human.

I pushed my head against Topa's chest, adjusting my position in the comforting blanket of her tails to rest my head on my front legs as she gently put her head on top of mine. I couldn't stop myself from smiling when I finally spoke again:

"I love you too, mom."

Chapter 40

Topa was in remarkably good spirits the day after and tried to share them with me, but my mind was elsewhere. After Agnes and I had parted, she had gone to talk to her parents, saying that she would come fetch me after the conversation.

She hadn't.

When I woke up in the morning, I went to sit by her door, waiting for her to step out of it, but as Rakuen came by to clean, she had let me know that Agnes had already left for school and requested that nobody wake me up so that I would get proper sleep before our incoming trip. The ninetales had woken up shortly after, and began playfully pestering me to join her in the training room, which I half-heartedly did, not wanting to potentially damage the progress we had made the day before. I wanted Agnes, and her sudden silence had me worried.

Maybe talking to her parents about moving out was a bad idea. I clearly remembered that doctor Belish told her she should delay the conversation until after the trip. I did not know why she had chosen to ignore the advice, but she had had so much confidence the day before that I never considered the possibility that the conversation could have gone wrong - which I was now certain it did.

"Try again," Topa said. "Two openings on your front paws."

I nodded, pretending I was just letting her know I had understood her instructions, but using the movement to take myself out of my thoughts and focus on my training. Taking a deep breath, I threw myself back a day, when I was trying to summon unfire outside of my body.

I created a puddle of fire onto my left front paw. As I moved my focus to try to create a new one, it disappeared, making me grunt in

frustration.

"I don't know how to keep it open," I confessed.

"It is similar to when you are opening your aura for the first time," Topa replied. "Do not make a hole as big, and keep pouring power out. It is a lot more intuitive than you would expect, I remember being surprised as well. I think you may be trying to focus fully on the new opening, but you should not. Keep the first one somewhere in your head. Imagine you are trying to track a rodent, then a new one comes in sight - you can start tracking the new one without losing the first one."

I couldn't say I was very experienced when it came to tracking rodents, but I understood what she was trying to say. My error was that I was trying to fully shift my attention instead of splitting it.

I focused on my exercise again. After opening my aura and creating a new puddle of unfire on my right paw, I partially shifted my attention to my left one, keeping the puddle of unfire in the back of my mind as if tracking something from the corner of my eye, and repeated the process. To my surprise, my left paw also became covered in unfire, and it wasn't difficult for me to keep them both surrounded.

"Wonderful!" Topa said. "I am stunned by how fast you learn these."

My first instinct was to reply that she was rejoicing too soon as I hadn't learnt Flame Charge yet, but I managed to stop myself and opted against it. I should probably avoid being negative for some time to give her the time she needed to recover, and shutting down her compliments was probably not a bright idea. My own negativity was probably misplaced, fuelled by my worry for my trainer.

"What do I do now?" I asked.

"The first step will be to open your aura in several places. If you want to cover your body rapidly, you do not need too many of them. One

on the snout, one at the tip of your tails, one on each of your paws, and one at the centre of your back will cover you decently quickly."

"That's... seven? That's quite a few."

"Is it? It never struck me as being that many."

My head lowered itself as I lost myself in thought. Maintaining seven open points for Flame Charge sounded like a serious chore - and the focus I would need for it was certainly going to be crucially missing from the battle I was fighting. There had to be another solution.

"Flame Charge is just for charging into opponents, right?"

"You can also use it to force your opponent to get off of you if you are cornered or pinned, but its main use is charging, retreating, or giving yourself increased speed, since the speed you gain lasts a while after you remove the unfire from your body."

"Does the speed boost apply if I only coat my legs?"

"I... have never tried. That is an interesting question."

She lowered her head, peeking thoughtfully at her own legs.

"Excuse me," she said. "I need to try."

"Can I watch?"

"Absolutely."

I had never seen her practice seriously, and the idea of Topa showing her prowess with her powers was so exciting I forgot I was supposed to practice myself. I walked away from the centre as she stood, shaking with a form of excitement that was alien to me.

She chuckled nervously.

"Shall I show you what Flame Charge looks like normally?"

"Okay."

She took a deep breath, her brow furrowing lightly in focus, and her body was coated in a layer of unfire.

The fire's appearance was so sudden that it made me jolt back. A large egg-shaped coat of flames was covering Topa's body, partially occulting her through the raging warmth of its fluttering colours. Her marvellous tails were coiled behind her, safely tucked under her fury, but her legs shyly poked out of it, creating four tiny pillars of fire that looked like the support for a sculpture. Responding to the swift assault of her power, my inner flame began crackling with excitement, a new form of frenzy invading me as my own powers wordlessly begged to be released.

The fiery egg tightened onto her body as she remained immobile, quickly outlining her with surprising accuracy and following the gracious movements of her tails that were extending behind her. Before long, the move faded, but my passion remained and I struggled with staying in place.

"This will grant me a speed boost that will last until the battle is over. Until my inner flame stops being in battle mode, if you will."

As if to showcase her newfound agility, she dashed towards me, reaching me before I could even react. Yelping in surprise, I ducked, but she harmlessly jumped over me before landing by my tails and gently covering my body with hers.

"I can feel that yours switched to battle mode," she said with a smile. "Would you like to play for a while?"

I almost shouted yes. With the energy coming from inside my body and my latest realisation about how I felt towards her, I couldn't bring myself to refuse to play with her, no matter what games we played, and regardless of my shame in acting like a normal animal. I was dying to play with her. I was dying to expend the energy I had gained from seeing her power.

"This evening," I said. "I think Agnes will take me to school to discuss our plans."

"Oh, you are right, I had forgotten. Where did you decide to go?"

"We'll go along the Gloss Forest then to the lake."

Topa frowned.

"The Gloss Forest is dangerous. Are you sure it is wise to go there?"

"It was my idea. I... want to check it out. I want to see the lights. I'll be with Agnes, so I'll be safe."

The ninetales stared at me with insistence, and my heart stopped. I recognised the distress in her eyes.

"Promise me you will stay safe," she said. "That you will not chase anything and you will stay close to Agnes."

"I promise, Topa. I asked to go because I wanted to check if the lights are wisps or pokemon..."

My head canted itself to the side.

"Say, Topa, now that I'm making progress on Flame Charge, would you teach me Will-O-Wisp?"

"Are you sure you want to be learning two moves simultaneously? That does not seem wise."

"I'll manage. I'm almost done with Flame Charge anyway."

She lowered her head, pensive. After what felt like several minutes debating herself, she looked up.

"Very well. I think it will be beneficial to you, and you have shown you learn fast enough for this not to be a problem."

I couldn't stop myself from barking in excitement. After sighing to herself, Topa began explaining to me how the move worked as she repeatedly used it for me to analyse, and I started learning to at least recognise the energy it emitted before I could practice creating it myself. As with my training with Pride, I was struggling to replicate the energy I was feeling, and I spent the rest of the morning increasing my own frustration as I faced repeated failures.

"So, what route will you take?" the commissioner asked.

We were sitting in the director's office.

When my trainer had come pick me up from the training room, I noticed a strangely salty smell coming from her, but she didn't allow me to investigate and hoisted me upon her shoulder, bringing me to the car to go to school. Her body temperature was strangely warm and she kept sniffing, making me worried that she might be falling sick right before our trip. In spite of her illness, she was doing her best to be as energetic and upbeat as she normally was.

I wasn't on Agnes' lap, this time, but sitting quietly on the round table by her side. Ilma was sitting opposite to me, looking over a map of the area that was almost exactly the one Agnes had at home.

My human pointed to it, tracing a path with her finger.

"We will head west from the house and go along the Gloss Forest. This should let us camp next to it. The day after we'll head east and go to the lake my family owns, sleep there, and we'll head back on Monday morning."

"This path is taking you more than two days," Belish said.

"Would it be acceptable for us to leave tomorrow, then? We would return home on Sunday afternoon."

"There's another problem," the commissioner said. "The Gloss Forest has been closed. Access to it will not be granted to anyone,

especially not police trainees."

Agnes nodded. "I am aware. That's why we will only walk alongside its border. Ruby was quite adamant going there, this is the best I can offer her."

"This was Ruby's idea?"

I barked to confirm. Ilma stared at me with a puzzled frown, and barked towards her trainer.

"You can," Belish said. "Agnes, stay quiet for a while, let them discuss this."

She didn't protest as the vapoleon turned back to me.

"Why?" the pokemon asked.

"I'm interested in that forest," I replied after a delay. "I want to see the lights. I want to know if they're pokemon or... something else."

"What else would they be?"

"Have you heard about the stories? The ghosts?"

My heart began racing. Topa had vaguely mentioned stories of ghosts or creatures haunting the woods, but would Ilma know about them? Was I supposed to?

"I know the stories humans tell one another, yes, but I don't believe in them. I don't think you should pay them any attention either."

"I think they're worth investigating. Especially the ones about the pale floating creatures and the mysteries that surround them. Topa told me that it is said whoever gets caught by them disappears forever and is cursed to haunt the woods seeking relief for their pain. What if those stories are linked to the attacks? We know the attacks are from the Gloss Forest, right?"

Ilma's eyes widened as I said that.

"I had not considered that," she admitted. "If what you're saying is true, then it's possible the attacks have been going on for longer than we think. It's also possible that there are more survivors who started spreading those stories."

"I understand the forest is dangerous, but we will remain out of it. Besides, I'll be with Agnes. We can keep each other safe."

The vapoleon remained silent, staring at the map, and I caught myself wondering if she knew how to read it.

"I accept your reasoning," she eventually said. "Yes, this is worth investigating, especially by you and your sense of smell. There is just one thing I want you to pay attention to. The stories mention a smell of rot and death, but we made the observation that the body was completely odourless. I want you to check on both of these."

"I will. That's part of why I wanted to go. I wanted to investigate the lack of smells."

"I approve of you going, but we will need to take steps to ensure you are safe."

"Shouldn't we let the humans know about the smell issue?"

"I have been trying," Ilma said with a sigh. "It's difficult to get understood on things like this, alas. I wish humans and pokemon could communicate more easily."

"After what they did to the leaders, maybe it's better this way."

The vapoleon frowned towards me. "You do realise that that is just a legend and did not actually occur, right?"

"I like to believe it did."

She quietly shook her head, then turned to Belish and barked again, nodding, then began growling.

"Ilma approves of Ruby's reasoning for going," Belish said.
"However... she's right. The forest is dangerous and we need to make sure you are safe."

"I think I have an idea how to," the commissioner said. "It might take me a bit of time to set up. Agnes, you are free to leave for now, but stay in the school, I want to see you again after class."

"Can I attend afternoon classes, then?"

"Of course."

"Also, do Sean and Pride have classes this afternoon?"

"Sean does, but they are human-only classes," Belish said.

"Thank you."

Agnes gave them a respectful bow before extending her arms towards me as she stood. I happily walked into them and she picked me up, comfortably sitting me on her shoulder.

"Would you like to spend the afternoon with Pride?" she asked.

I barked joyfully as a reply before looking at Ilma to bid her goodbye directly. She gave me a short smile as a reply, and my trainer and I left the room.

"I can summon fire outside my body however I want now," I said.

Pride and I had returned to our usual training spot, catching the espeon by surprise when Agnes had come into the gym asking if he would be willing to spend the afternoon with me as she had business with the commissioner in the evening and couldn't return home before then. Staring at him with a smile, I summoned two puddles of

fire upon my front paws, then closed them and summoned a new one at the base of my tails.

"Impressive," Pride said. "You got even better at it. You did this for the first time only two days ago, remember? Your learning speed is astonishing."

"Thank you."

"Have you made progress with telekinetic energy?"

I shook my head.

"I didn't dare ask Topa for help with that. She's recovered, now, I think. She agreed to teach me Will-O-Wisp. I don't want to risk throwing her back into depression."

"Was her depression linked to her psychic powers?"

I gasped as I realised the mistake I had made.

"I don't want to tell you more about it," I whispered. "It's personal."

"I understand."

Pride stood up and went to fetch a pebble.

"I think you're ready to start learning to create the right kind of energy, now. Your control over unfire is staggering, to be honest, especially given how young you are. You should show your progress to Pico, he will be impressed."

Pico. I hadn't been spending much time with him at all. Since the end of the wrestling tournament, I didn't remember interacting with him at all outside of meeting him in the morning.

I missed him.

"I will," I said. "Once we come back from our trip with Agnes."

"Are you going on a trip?"

I couldn't stop myself from groaning.

"It's a long story and I don't want to explain it."

Pride chuckled in response, and turned his attention to the pebble. It began floating in the air, surrounded by a light blue halo. Compared to the first time I had seen this, I was able to much more accurately detect the energy, and it was feeling a little weird to me - more palpable.

"I can feel something," I said. "I think I'm... I don't know. The energy feels more defined to me."

"Good. I'll teach you a trick that made me able to learn new moves quite quickly, even ones I didn't know the energies for. I'm not sure if it will work for you, considering your inner flame is unique among pokemon as far as I know, but it's worth a try. If it doesn't work, please ask Topa for help. For now, close your eyes."

"Why?"

"Think of it as a game. I'm going to test your understanding of energies. Tell me which of these energies you recognise and what they are."

I gulped nervously as I obeyed. I knew my understanding of pokemon powers was lacking at best. What if he realised it and understood something wasn't right?

A type of energy appeared next to me that I didn't recognise. There was, however, something familiar about it, but I couldn't point out what.

"I don't know it, but I feel like I should."

"Very good! That was a Ghost-type move, Shadow Ball. It felt familiar because it's part of the psychic triangle. What about this one?"

The energy I felt was completely unknown to me.

"No clue."

"That isn't surprising. It was Grass. One more."

I recognised that one the moment it came out.

"Fire!"

"Correct! You can open your eyes now."

I obeyed, surprised to find that nothing around me had changed.

"See, you have the ability to recognise these energies. You can even tell the difference between ones that are very close together. That means that you will easily be able to replicate and create them once you figure out how to create one."

"Then how do I create one?"

"You already can."

He turned his head to me smiling widely, but I remained confused for a moment, until I realised he was right.

I could create unfire.

I threw myself back over a month, when I was trying to learn Ember with Topa. I had been able to detect the energy from the start, although it took me time to understand what it was. All I had to do to create unfire was switch my inner flame by simply imagining it. What if this was similar?

It couldn't be. Unfire came from my inner flame, and pokémon that were not fire-type did not have one. Pride had mentioned that his process for casting moves was different. It had to be different for me as well. The inner flame had to be something specific to fire for fire-

type pokemon, and probably the explanation why their fire moves were more powerful.

Did Pride have something equivalent but for psychic moves?

"Think of how you create your fire," Pride said, thinking my mutism was a sign of hesitation. "Then remember you can identify other energies, and try to create the one you need. Focus on your eyes."

The eyes. Telekinesis caused a pokemon's eyes to glow. What if that was caused by their powers? What if the eyes were the source of unpsychic energy like my inner flame was the source of my unfire?

My head lowered itself as I began focusing on what I could feel around my eyes. Besides the aura protecting me, there was nothing. My inner flame was flickering shyly somewhere in my chest, waiting to be called upon, but my eyes felt like they didn't exist.

My mind wandered back to the floating pebble as I began focusing on the energy that surrounded it. I could still very clearly feel it. It pulsed differently from unfire, but there was some similarities between the two. As I focused harder on my memories, I began toying with the unfire in me to try to reshape it into something new. Before long, I could feel something pulsating in my eyes. A kind of energy I had recently learnt to recognise.

"Very good," Pride said. "Now open your eyes, and direct it towards the pebble."

I obeyed, nearly jolting as I realised that my vision had taken on a slight blue hue. A hue I recognised.

I focused on the aura surrounding my face and pierced two holes in it right before my eyes. As I turned my head towards the pebble Pride had used for demonstration, I began moving energy through the holes like I had been doing with fire, but forced on myself to extend it further than my body. Still focusing on the pebble, I pulled on my power to throw a jet of it forward.

A line of blue light was ejected from me and hit the pebble, gently pushing it away.

My vision returned to normal as I barked with glee.

"You're... stupendous."

Pride's face was elongated as he was staring at the pebble I had successfully cast telekinesis on.

"It took you just one try to create the right kind of energy. Not just that, but you also immediately figured out how to direct it towards your target. I didn't even have to explain it. Ruby, you are by far the most intelligent and the most talented pokemon I have ever come across."

My cheeks warmed up as I blushed.

"I see now why Topa accepted to teach you Will-O-Wisp. It probably will take you less than a day to learn it. You could learn any move you want within just a couple days."

"Is that... is that bad?"

"No, absolutely not. I think you should be proud of yourself."

"Why does my vision become blue?"

"Your eyes glow when you use telekinesis, remember? This allows you to keep track of where your energy is. Normally, you can only see energy once it's attached to something or someone, but with this, you can see it moving in the air."

"Can humans see it?"

"Humans can't see the telekinetic halo, no. I'm glad they can't, to be honest, it makes things easier for us."

"I want to show Agnes I learnt telekinesis."

Pride chuckled gently, then topped my head with his weird split tail.

"You didn't learn telekinesis quite yet, Ruby, but it won't take you too long to. Right now, you'll be able to push objects with this power. I need you to practice doing this instantly, then once you can, I'll teach you how to surround an object with your power to lift it."

"Do you think I should show Topa?"

The espeon's eyes diverted themselves to the skies.

"I'm not sure. I don't know how it would affect her. This is something you'd have to figure out alone."

"I'll still show Agnes, then."

"That you should."

He removed his tail from my head and bent over playfully.

"Why don't we continue the game we did last time now?"

"Alright."

I took a few steps away from him, mentally preparing myself to be littered with rocks again. Although I hadn't admitted the first time, I had found this game he came up with to be particularly fun, despite being somewhat painful - and it would become less painful as I became better at it. We were just playing together with the powers we had, which was no different from the Ember games I had been playing with Topa.

Thinking back about it, I hadn't been honest with myself about why I had been refusing to play with her. I clearly had no issues playing as a pokemon with Pride. Whatever the reason for my refusal was, it was no longer valid. If I was playing with the espeon, I could play with the ninetales as well. She deserved it.

As Pride threw the first pebble at me and I ducked to dodge, I made myself a silent promise that, once Agnes and I returned from the trip, I would play with Topa to her heart's content.

Chapter 41

"Time to go to school, Ruby."

It was still early in the day, but I had been up for a while already, waiting with as much patience as I could on my bed so that I would not wake Topa. We hadn't slept together because we knew I had to be up early and decided it would be better to stay separate. It was just for one day.

Agnes silently came to pick me up and carry me downstairs. Her temperature was back to normal and she was no longer sniffing. She smelled mildly upset, but most of all, she smelled excited. I couldn't help but share her excitement - I was looking forward to the trip and trying to enforce cuddling and sleeping together.

Our plans had changed slightly the night before. The director had ordered us to stop by the school first to give us something that should keep us safe. We would then be taken directly towards the Gloss Forest to stationed policemen that were enforcing the closure of the woods in order to announce ourselves so we could be tracked more easily. We had strict orders to go along the forest edge only and never step into it, which we were intent on following.

We were standing by Agnes' car when Rakuen brought her a backpack she would be taking with her for the trip, probably containing food and something for her to sleep on. She didn't seem to have a tent like she did for the lake trip. To my surprise, Topa was walking with the maid, and sat in front of her. She emitted a quiet whine towards my trainer.

Agnes knelt and gently petted the ninetales.

"I'm sorry, Topa, but you can't come with us for this one," she said. "This is for school and Ruby and I need to be alone for it."

Topa whimpered again, transiently peeking at me, and walked into Agnes' belly.

"I know what you're thinking," Agnes whispered. "Ruby will be safe with me, okay? She's not leaving you. She will come back. We will come back. It's just two days. Do you think you can do this for me?"

The ninetales emitted another whine and slowly nodded, rubbing herself on Agnes. After petting her for a minute, my trainer gave her a kiss on the head and let her go, and she walked up to me. Before I could say anything, she put her head on top of mine and let out a heavy sigh.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I am so scared for you. A lot of anxious thoughts are running through my head right now."

"That's because you think you're being exposed to a situation that hurt you before. It's not the same, okay? I'm not alone. You didn't yell at me. I'm going on a trip with Agnes to fix my relationship with her."

"I understand that, just... I cannot help it."

I extracted myself from her embrace and licked her muzzle.

"I'll come back, Topa, I promise. And I'll be feeling better."

"All right. Please take care of yourself and of Agnes. I will wait for you."

I felt a pinch in my heart when I turned around to get into the cage Agnes had installed on the front passenger seat and couldn't stop myself from peeking towards the mansion. Topa was sitting by Rakuen, tearing up, staring at us with insistence. When the car started and Agnes drove through the portal, she stood and took a few steps forward, held back by the maid, and kept staring at us until I could no longer see her.

A quiet whimper escaped me as I fought myself not to cry.

"Ruby, it's okay," Agnes said. "Topa is... going through difficult things right now. I'll explain when we're back, okay? It's not your fault. You're not doing anything wrong."

Was I not?

Topa was essentially reliving the death of her son - at least how she pictured it. Seeing me go through the portal, knowing I was going to the forest where her kit had disappeared, was giving her flashbacks of that event. Even Agnes accompanying me wasn't helping.

"You should probably spend a lot of time with her when we return," Agnes said. "She will need it. I wish she could get help for what happened, but there are no therapists for pokemon, you know? That's kind of unfair. You're as intelligent as us. Therapy would work for you. It certainly worked for me."

Her gentle chuckle stopped me from getting stuck on her last sentence.

"Let's focus on the trip, then we can take care of Topa. She might be envious that you're spending time with me like this when she doesn't get to do it with Melissa. Maybe things will change thanks to this, who knows?"

A heavy sigh followed her statement, and she turned back to the road to focus on driving.

We went to the director's office directly upon reaching the school. As other students were already in class, I didn't get a chance to talk to Pico, and Ilma wasn't with Belish either - only the commissioner's absol had come.

"So, are you ready for your trip?" the doctor asked.

"We are," Agnes said. "We've kind of been looking forward to it, to be frank."

"That's good."

The director walked up to her and handed her a black box the size of a phone with a large button on its largest face.

"This is basically a GPS," he said. "We give one of those to our rescue teams in case they get stranded during a mission, caught under rubble, in an avalanche, you get the gist. It's just a beacon that constantly emits a signal that our backline keeps track of. This button is a distress call."

Agnes took the device and peered at it with an eyebrow raised.

"So you think we may be in danger if we go on that trip?"

The director raised a single eyebrow. "We don't think that our rescue teams are in danger when we send them off, but we're aware we send them to dangerous environments. The beacon is a precaution in case something happens. You're going to go along the Gloss Forest, so similarly, we need to take precaution in case something happens. We're still unsure whether or not the forest is linked to the attacks, but until we can prove it isn't, we have to assume it is."

"If we thought you would be in danger, we would not be sending you," Belish said. "However, we have to face the unpleasant truth. There might be something in that forest attacking fire-type pokemon. As long as you stay outside of its boundaries, you're likely to be fine, but better safe than sorry."

"Why allow us to go at all if there's even a slight possibility of danger?"

The doctor and the director looked each other in the eyes, and it was Belish who replied.

"The trip will be important for you to repair your relationship with your pokemon. As long as you stick together, you will keep each other safe. Remember that all victims had been separated from their trainers."

"Besides, I have an assignment for you," the director said. "We believe that Ilma noticed something in that crime scene we took you to. I'm willing to bet Ruby also noticed it, and that's why Ilma approves of the trip - she wants her to investigate something."

The humans became silent as they turned to me. I nodded with a confident bark, then intently sniffed at the floor, but they turned to one another again and ignored my attempt at communicating.

"I need you to investigate the border of the forest," he continued. "You might be able to understand what Ilma has been trying to say. This will also help you develop your communication and teamwork, and since you were interested in being a detective, it might weigh positively in your career."

Agnes peered at me with inquisitive eyes, then gave a very slow nod, her mouth opening slightly.

"I see. Understood, I will do it."

"Keep a journal of your observations. Keep watch of Ruby's behaviour as well, and make sure you stay alert. If you notice anything, don't hesitate to push the distress button. A team of policemen will be at your location within an hour at most, either on foot or in a helicopter."

"Why did doctor Belish not go investigate with Ilma directly?"

"I was going to, but the commissioner had the idea to make it an assignment for you. If you fail to find anything, we will return there and investigate ourselves. I'll probably take you with us as well, Ruby's sense of smell might be of use, and you might learn something."

"I see. So if I find something, I will be helping the investigation, but if I don't, it won't harm it either."

Belish replied with a smile.

"That's fair," Agnes said.

She attached the device to the back of her belt and knelt next to me, arms open. I threw myself in them with a joyful bark, my tails wagging violently, and she hoisted me up to sit me on her shoulder.

"An officer will drive you to the access point," the commissioner said. "Give us a call once you're home and we'll arrange to pick you up from there. Leave your car here."

"Alright. I'll get going now, then."

"Good luck. Looking forward to your report."

Passing the checkpoint seemed to be a bit tedious for Agnes - while I was waiting in a cage in the police car, she had to step out and talk to the two guarding officers. I couldn't see anything from my position, but when she stepped back into the car, she was grumbling. Her mood quickly improved when I yelped at her and she sneaked a finger into the cage to rub my head.

We were finally allowed to get out when we reached the edge of the forest, only a few minutes after the checkpoint. I wasn't sure why the protective barrier had been established so far from the forest, but I could only assume it was to set up a no man's land between the trees and the habitations to make sure whatever was in there attacking pokemon could not sneak out and attack the ones who would have walked by, even with the protection. The police officer who drove us there wished us good luck and left.

Agnes readjusted the straps of her heavy backpack and smiled in my direction. Her smile, however, was transient.

"Before we go into the woods, there's something I wanted to show you, Ruby, but I'm not sure if I should."

I barked with as much enthusiasm as I could, but her hesitation made me weary. She nodded with a sorry smile and started walking, with me at her heel.

"I'm sorry the car ride was so long," she said. "I asked them to take me to a specific spot of the forest edge. I didn't want to be dropped off straight after the police belt. After all, we do need to get inside the woods, so we might as well, right?"

We didn't walk long. She stopped by the forest, next to a small abandoned building, its cracked stone revealing the damage of time and weather. The place looked familiar to me, in a way that made my tails shiver and ears perk. All my senses were fully alert. Even my inner flame was abnormally excited and I was ready to battle.

I jolted when something touched my back, but it was only Agnes who had knelt and put a hand on me trying to reassure me. I took a few steps back, going away from the forest.

"You recognise this place, don't you?"

Was I supposed to? The area was familiar to me but I didn't know what it was. All I knew was that I was scared.

I shook my head, and Agnes sighed.

"This is where I found you... well, dying. I just... I don't know, I thought it would be fitting to bring you here. This is where it all started for us. Since I did things wrong the first try, I... I guess this is like a fresh start, right? Except this time you're alive and well and I can do things right."

I canted my head to the side and barked inquisitively in her direction. With a strange chuckle charged with sorrow and amusement, she began petting the top of my head.

"Say, pokemon really can understand us, right?"

I nodded, and she let out a sorrowful chuckle again before lifting me off the ground, looking me in the eyes. She was tearing up.

"I'm sorry, Ruby. I should have been more than I was, but I want you to know I'm willing to change. I know I did nothing to show it, but I do love you. Do you believe me?"

I barked with a strong nod, and she smiled.

"Doctor Belish was right. I wasn't allowing myself to love you and I was hiding behind the rules of my family as an excuse. I just... I was scared. Topa and my mom were both destroyed by the death of Topa's son. I was scared of this happening to me if something ever happened to you. I was keeping myself away and I hadn't realised it hurt you."

I stopped her speech by licking her nose, but she didn't laugh. She endured it for a few seconds until I stopped, aware that I technically wasn't allowed to, and remained quiet so she could continue what she was trying to say.

"Do you know what my parents said after I told them I was planning on moving out so that I could spend more time with you?"

I shook my head.

"They're going to disown me."

Her body jolted slightly, and she began crying.

As her hold of me faltered, I sneaked more tightly into her arms and rubbed my head against her. She only bawled for a few seconds, but continued crying intermittently afterwards.

"My mom doesn't love me," she said. "I think she stopped loving me after the accident. It wasn't worth it anymore for her."

She pointed to her skull, showing me an ugly scar right under her hairline that followed it almost perfectly.

"When I was 12 and Topa a few months old, I was hit by a bus on my way to school. My scalp was ripped right off and surgeons had to reattach it. I nearly died on the operating table. It was a difficult surgery but in the end it went okay."

I couldn't stop myself from wincing as I began picturing what that looked like on her.

"The surgery took hours and it took me just as long to wake up. I was told that Topa had been waiting by the door of the waking room."

I remembered the ninetales mentioned waiting by a door, but she believed it was the door to Agnes' room. Was Topa mistaken, or had she simplified the story?

"Of course, they didn't let her see me until I was back in my room. She was with a policeman. I was still smiling at the time, I knew it was just an accident and the idea that I had lost most of my hair was funny to me."

Her body was shaken by another shiver.

"I stopped smiling when the policeman told me my parents wouldn't visit me. That was when I realised that they didn't love me. They didn't, but Topa did, and I didn't care. I just wanted to die. Why should I live if I'm not worthy of my parents' love?"

Her tears finally stopped as she took a deep breath, and laid her hand on me again. She was still shaking, but her gaze was full of resolve.

"The policeman who was with Topa got back in my room and talked to me. I told him that I didn't want to live since my parents didn't love me. He replied that I was looking at things the wrong way. He said I

shouldn't be trying to live for the people who don't love me, but that I should live for myself first and then seek love from the ones who are already giving me some. He said that family isn't something one is born with, but something one chooses, and that I would be happy once I chose my own family. That I had the power to make myself worthy of love."

She gave me a kiss on the head, which I returned by pushing myself into her.

"That's why I decided to live. I wanted to find someone who loved me. I wanted to be with Topa, but she was Melissa's pokemon and I knew it wouldn't work. So, that day, I decided that I would have a vulpix of my own, and that I would join the police force so that I could give love to the people who don't get any. Like that officer did for me."

Her petting increased in intensity, as did her shaking.

"When I found you here, I felt like my dreams were coming true. You were wild. You were dying. I could both save your life and give you the love you didn't have. You were perfect for me. I was euphoric when Nurse Joy said you would survive, but when I took you home..." She shuddered. "I got so scared. All I could think of was how hurt I was when I realised my mom didn't love me. I was terrified of hurting you the same way, so I pulled myself away and I was oblivious to the fact that I was doing the very thing I wanted to avoid."

She finally stood and took a few steps towards the forest.

"I'm sorry I hurt you and I forced you to stay with me. As much as the policeman's words touched me, I failed to act on them. That's part of why I wanted to come here. I don't know where you lived, but I hope you can safely find your way home from here."

My breath failed as she turned to me.

"You should be able to choose your family too, Ruby. I would understand if you didn't want to stay with me after how I treated you."

How could she ever believe that I would leave her? None of this was her fault. It was her environment - her parents wanting to disown her if she emancipated herself was proof of it. She blamed herself for her shortcomings. She shouldn't.

I barked angrily, my tails wagging with fury, and threw myself towards her. rubbing myself against her legs with insistence, barking and yelping, and stood on my back legs as I could to request to be picked up. A teary gasp accompanied her arms as she obeyed, and she tightly held me against her chest for several seconds.

"Thank you," she whispered.

She kissed my head again, sniffing loudly to swallow her tears, and put me back on the ground. With a smile, she adjusted her backpack and began walking, with me by her side, and we finally began the trip we had been looking forward to.

Chapter 42

We had to walk along the edge of the forest for what I estimated to be half an hour before we could safely turn and walk into the trees. The police cordon extended far past our turning point, probably wrapping around most of the forest for safety, and making me question its utility if it was too big to be fully watched.

I was immediately reminded of familiar sights once we made it past the forest edge and the city was no longer visible behind us. The woods we were in were strikingly similar to the ones we had strolled through on our trip to the mountain lake where I had met the wild eevee - not too surprising given that, according to Agnes, it was all one giant forest.

The edge of the Gloss Forest itself was remarkably visible, even from within the forest. A line of dirt with consistent width like a hiking track crawled along the trees that came to an abrupt stop in an almost perfect curve. Trees that were part of the Gloss Forest were larger and darker than their counterparts on the other side of the dirt pathway, but the leaves were the same kind, indicating that the trees were of the same species.

After taking me a little deeper into the forest, Agnes stopped.

"I had never realised the trees were different colours," she said. "I've never been here. I don't know what this dirt road is either. Maybe the forest was man-made and it's the marker for where it should end?" She turned to me. "I wonder what you were doing in the Gloss Forest. Do you remember anything?"

I shook my head and took a trembling step towards the dirt. My entire body was still in full alert and my anxiety only grew as I walked closer to the trees. Agnes silently stayed behind me, covering me with all her height.

The dirt had a smell. There was absolutely nothing remarkable about it or about the trees surrounding the edge. It was just a normal forest.

"What are you looking for?" Agnes asked. "I noticed you've been trying to say something about smells. You keep smelling the floor when we mention the crime scene. Have you picked up a scent?"

I shook my head again.

"Then what are you looking for?"

I sat in place, trying to figure out how to communicate the idea to her. For the first time in two months, I missed human speech - being able to just talk to the humans would have made all of this significantly easier.

Short on solutions, I sniffed at the ground again, then vigorously shook my head. Agnes stared at me with a mild frown, visibly confused, and I repeated the gesture before raising my head and closing my eyes.

"Let's get going," she said with a sigh. "We can discuss this again over lunch, okay?"

I couldn't repress an annoyed grunt at how much she failed to understand me, but hopped over to her nonetheless. I had a few hours to figure out what exactly to do. Maybe sitting down and resting would allow us to communicate more easily. At the very least, being away from the creepy dirt road and close to her would help me be less nervous.

Walking by her side instead of behind her was extremely pleasant. She hummed to herself a song that I did not recognise, smiling widely, and occasionally peeking at me to check if I was keeping up or wanted anything. She would stop regularly to pluck a giant berry from the top of a tree that was out of my reach and feed it to me. If my reaction to the fruit was positive, she would pluck a few more of

them and store them in a bag she had brought in her backpack. I enjoyed the taste of most of them, but a select few made me retch or cough violently as soon as my tongue came in contact with them, and Agnes hurriedly tossed them to the ground below their trees before kneeling to comfort me.

By the time she decided to halt our march to take some rest, we had collected quite a few of those gigantic berries, making the back of her backpack bulge amusingly. We walked around a little to find a good area to rest in - essentially just looking for a rock or trunk for her to sit on.

"Let's take a break," she said, putting her backpack down as she sat. "I'm hungry and a bit tired. Are you hungry?"

I gave her a shy nod in reply - I wasn't supposed to eat at noon as my meals were only in the morning and evening, and I felt like I was doing something wrong by confessing to being hungry, especially given that I had never asked for food in the past.

She pulled a large pink berry from her bag and handed it to me. Of all the berries she gave me, it was the one I had liked the most. My tails began wagging furiously as she deposited it on a towel she had laid on the ground before me.

"You can eat," she said, pulling a ham sandwich out of her bag. "We're going to need energy for the rest of the day."

She opened the bread and tore some of the ham off, which she handed me with a smile.

I canted my head to the side, staring with confusion at the piece of meat she was holding.

"Eat it," she said. "Mom never allowed you to get any of our food, but I bet it smelled amazing, right? You can have this while she's not watching."

It took her a bit of time to convince me it really was fine for me to eat some of her food from her hand, but I couldn't have been happier when I finally did. After eating it, I grabbed my berry and deposited it in her open hand.

"Sorry, Ruby, I can't eat this. We call them pokemon berries for a reason. They taste horrible for humans. They're toxic for most people, too. I'm not sure I can eat them since I've never had any, so I have to avoid it for now. I promise I'll try every one of them when we're home, okay?"

I nodded for a reply and dropped the berry back on the towel to finish it. How could something this delicious taste horrible for humans? Was it something wrong with their sense of taste? I had noticed that my sense of taste had drastically changed when I turned into a vulpix, but the ham I had just been given tasted similar to what I remembered - and was just as good.

I ate the berry before Agnes finished her sandwich and sat by the towel, quietly observing her, my tails making muffled sounds as they rubbed the dead leaves on the ground with their slow wagging. She would occasionally rip out another tiny piece of her food to give to me, and I would joyfully eat it, careful not to bite the hand that fed me, making her chuckle before she resumed her meal.

I waited until she finished eating and started paying attention to me again to turn my focus to the towel laid before me. Digging back in my memories, I recalled into my mind how the floating pebble felt, reshaping the energy inside of me. The pulsating I had yet to get used to resumed in my eyes, and I opened two holes in front of them from my protective aura to project the new energy onto the towel, my vision turning to a blue hue as I watched a beam of brighter blue shoot towards my target, pushing it and flipping it over telekinetically.

Agnes jolted.

"Ruby, was that you?"

I nodded with enthusiasm, and she became radiant.

"You can use telekinesis? That's amazing! Were you waiting for this trip to show me? When did you learn?"

I wasn't sure how to answer all of her questions at once and slowly shook my head, then barked with joy and pushed the towel further. She picked it up and ruffled the top of my head.

"I'm proud of you, Ruby. That means you can start learning new moves and we'll get a lot stronger in battles."

Proud of me.

My entire being inflated with importance as her words resonated in my head. Before I could drown in the new weight of my fed ego, Agnes had me experiment with my telekinesis to perform various tasks for her, most of which I failed as I didn't have good enough control over the energies yet, but my shortcomings didn't bother me. Just spending time with her, doing things or performing tricks for her, made me happy beyond saying.

After several minutes spent playing with my poor attempts at telekinesis, Agnes threw her backpack over her shoulders again.

"Let's get going," she said. "We still have quite a bit to go. We'll walk slowly for a couple hours, but after that we can pick the pace up and start investigating the forest. Is that okay with you?"

I nodded. I had completely forgotten about the investigation we were supposed to conduct - in my head, all this was just a simple hiking trip with my trainer.

I was abruptly reminded of the danger that lurked in the forest to our side and reflexively stepped away from it to hide behind Agnes' legs.

"What is it, Ruby? Did you notice anything?"

I let out a deep sigh and shook my head.

"Let's go. Bark if you notice anything unusual, okay?"

Progress through the afternoon was slow. Keeping an anxious eye on the forest edge, expecting a pale ghost to irrupt out of it to attack me at any moment, I slowed down my step in order to keep my nose close to the floor and always have the smells of the forest in mind. There weren't any pokemon or animal smells any close to the dirt path - some very faint human ones only, probably policemen - but I was smelling things without trouble. Whatever the absence of smell Ilma and I had noticed was, I couldn't link it to the forest itself. It had to be linked to whatever attacked the fire-type pokemon - and had attacked me. In the back of my head, I remembered Ilma's warning about the smell of rot - the one that Topa had mentioned from the stories she told me. Yet, in spite of all my caution, there was absolutely nothing remarkable about that forest, and we didn't see any floating blue lights.

Agnes was walking right behind me, almost uncomfortably close, and occasionally writing on a notepad she had pulled out of her backpack, keeping a close eye on me as I investigated smells. When she encountered an obstacle, even small enough for her to just step over, she had me push it away with telekinesis, and I was happy to oblige. She was just trying to keep the trip fun even though we were actually working, and I couldn't blame her - I could smell her being tense, hear her heart beating nervously, and see her peek too regularly at the forest.

Part of me was hoping we would see the lights come nightfall because I was curious to know what they really were. Agnes had seen them the night she found me, but was obviously unable to identify them. If they were linked to a pokemon move, I would be able to tell what they really were, but if they weren't, then they were actual ghosts and I would be as lost and scared as she was.

The afternoon passed all too quickly. We had gone deep into the woods, probably close to where we would camp for the night, our investigation and wariness had taken so much of our attention that we were no longer playing with each other through my telekinesis,

fully focused on trying to figure out what exactly was going on in the forest. Agnes tried to find some of the blue lights, and I tried to figure out what that dirt road was if it wasn't naturally formed by the passing of pokemon and animals, and why it was so cleanly cut around the forest edge. The coming nightfall had brought the entire forest to a halt as it had become eerily quiet. Still trying to investigate the dirt road, I couldn't smell anything on it anymore - no animals, pokemon, or humans. Not even the smell of dirt and grass.

In fact, I couldn't smell anything at all.

I raised my head, intensely sniffing the air. Nothing. None of my senses seemed to work anymore. The forest was silent like a cemetery.

I turned to Agnes and began barking in mild panic. She reacted immediately, kneeling to my side and trying to comfort me, but I didn't stop trying to warn her, slapping my snout onto the floor then shaking my head with violence.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Her eyes had widened slightly. She had clearly understood I was scared. In a desperate attempt to make her understand we needed to flee, I grabbed the leg of her pants and tried to pull her away from the forest.

"What did you notice?"

She looked at the trees, and both of us froze.

A smell of rot appeared so strong that we began gagging. With it came something from the trees of the Gloss Forest.

It was a ghost.

Pale and floating towards us slowly, it was made of white skin stretched to the point of tearing over the skeletal structure of a large

human hand. Nails replaced with long red claws and muscle visible through wounds in the skin, it was almost as tall as Agnes herself, and although it had no eyes, I could tell that its attention was on us.

Then, a form of energy appeared behind us that I didn't recognise, dangerously similar to what I had felt from Pride or from Topa's Will-O-Wisp move.

I turned to the ghost and began growling, but Agnes shrieked. Trying to keep track of the hand's position, I turned again to look at her. Her whole body shivering, she was stuck in place like somebody had taken a picture of her as she was stepping back, foreign saliva dripping from her forehead. There was a black figure as big as the hand floating before her.

A haunter.

I reflexively threw an Ember towards it. The surprise attack made it whimper and vanish, but more of the unknown energy appeared behind me. I jolted forward, dodging, and turned. There was another haunter behind me, and that one was looking for a fight.

"Ruby," Agnes said.

Her speech was slow and groaning. She was fighting the paralysis to talk to me.

"Stay behind me. Don't run."

Another voice came from the forest. A male, human one. "You can't escape."

My heart racing, I quietly obeyed my trainer, stepping towards her to hide behind her legs. Above me was her belt and the distress beacon the commissioner had given her.

"What do we do?" another voice asked. "This one has its trainer with it."

I focused on my eyes again, like I had done before with the towel.

"She's paralysed with Lick. She's not going anywhere."

Psychic power escaped through holes I made in my protective aura, and I pushed it into the large red button of the device.

"She's seen the haunters."

I threw an Ember towards the voices. Somebody cried out in pain, and the two haunter that surrounded me were staying in place. A string of expletives came from the forest, and the two men finally showed themselves.

They wore white robes and black masks that hid their faces. The smell of rot became stronger as they stepped towards us, to the point of masking their personal scents. Around us, everything was still silent. The energies I felt were coming from the two haunters I could see. As I focused on them to keep track of their positions should the pokemon turn invisible, I realised that the white hand was glowing with a similar energy, but muffled like a lamp shining through a cloth.

I shot another Ember in its direction, and it yelped as it got hit.

"Grab the vulpix!"

The two haunter then rushed in my direction.

One on the snout, one at the tip of the tails, one on each of the paws, and one at the centre of the back.

I opened my aura up as Topa had instructed me and poured as much power through it as I could. Before my opponents could reach me, my entire body became covered in Unfire. They stopped when they saw I had become one giant torch of power.

"Go in!" Agnes grunted.

Picking the haunter that was closest to me, I jumped as high as I could, throwing myself into it. It emitted another loud whine as we collided, and I continued forward as it was tossed aside.

"Ember!"

As soon as I fell back to the floor, I turned around and shot a fireball. The haunter was still trying to recover from my first attack when my Ember hit it in the back.

"Use Mean Look!"

The second haunter stared at me, its eyes enlarging and turning to a light purple shade similar to that of my telekinesis. They became so big that the entire forest became encompassed in them. When they vanished, I found myself unable to look away from the haunter.

"Got her."

"Ruby, jump!"

I jumped, and a ball of a now familiar energy flew below me. Shadow Ball. The energy I had been feeling was that of Ghost-type pokemon.

"To the side!" Agnes shouted.

I rolled, and the haunter my eyes were locked on harmlessly charged through my previous position. As soon as it turned around to face me again, my entire body turned on its own to face it in return, and I threw an Ember that hit it straight-on.

"Shut up," one of the men said.

He broke out of the cover of the trees to run behind Agnes and put a hand on her mouth, muffling her orders.

I managed to hit the haunter that had me locked on it another time, but a Shadow Ball coming from behind me toppled me forward.

Groaning in pain, I stood once more, facing my opponent, and gasped in horror.

The white hand had moved from its position and was now facing Agnes. Capitalising on my hesitation, the first man ran to me and pulled me off the floor. Struggling with as much intensity as I could, I tried biting and scratching, but a muzzle was slammed onto me and I was rendered powerless.

"Why don't we just kill this one?" the man holding me said.

"Look at her belly. She's the survivor."

There was a short silence. The haunter my eyes were riveted on had moved over to Agnes, who was silently groaning, trying to fight the paralysis she had been victim of.

"Take her back to the lab. She will be useful for the experiments."

"What about the trainer?"

"We don't have a choice, do we?"

The man holding Agnes shook his head and let her go.

"I know what you're doing," she growled, panting. "That white hand is another haunter. Let my pokemon go."

"Not a possibility," the man behind me said. "Haunter."

The white hand disappeared, replaced by another pokemon - Agnes had guessed right. All the stories were wrong. The ghosts of the forest were just pokemon.

"Use Shadow Claw."

A powerful roar escaped me as I began struggling again. I didn't bother opening my aura this time. It was real fire that I ordered to cover my body.

The haunter that had disguised itself floated close to Agnes, levelling itself with her stomach as she impotently fought the paralysis. Its hands were coated in a dark purple aura. The energy that came from them wasn't an unpower.

"She's using real fire!" the man holding me shouted.

Heat had started emanating from me. The fire was only covering my legs, but it was enough to make the man grunt. Fighting with desperation, I pushed more of it onto my body.

The other man walked from Agnes with a rock in his hand. He barked an order to his haunter, who slashed her stomach.

I was knocked unconscious as she collapsed.

Chapter 43

"Ruby, wake up!"

I jolted awake. My head was pounding and my vision remained blurry for a few seconds until I became properly aware of my surroundings.

I was still in the forest. The trees around me, dark and thick, loomed oppressively over my body as I laid discarded on the ground, my ears and nose still unable to detect anything. There was barely any light sipping through the trees, and what little of it that made it to the ground was of blue and grey tones - night had yet to pass.

A grey eevee was pawing at me.

"Eevee?" I asked.

"Get up."

My head, still too painful for me to stand, spun as I looked around me.

Two figures wearing long white robes and black masks laid unconscious around me. Two of their haunTERS were dumped on them, their tongues hanging from their mouths. The third was missing.

"What happened?"

"No time," the eevee pressed. "We need to go."

"Did you..."

A yelp escaped me as the eevee bit one of my tails.

"Why are you so scared?" I asked.

"I'll explain when we're out of this forest."

I reluctantly stood as I could, trying to ignore the pounding in my head that made me dizzy, as the eevee stepped towards me and sniffed me intently, maybe to check me for injuries. When I turned back to the humans, my blood began boiling with rage.

Agnes.

"I need to go back," I said. "My trainer..."

"She's dead. Don't bother. We need to get out."

My breathing stopped.

"She's not dead. I won't let that happen."

"We don't have time to check on her. There will be more haunter coming back. Maybe more of those humans."

"I don't care."

The eevee scoffed.

"Right, you're going to take on a swarm of haunter all on your own when you couldn't even take on two of them."

Her remark calmed me right down.

She was right. I hadn't been able to protect Agnes. Even though they were haunter and evolved, I should have been able to. The only thing I could do was push the distress signal on her beacon. I couldn't stop her from being killed.

I couldn't just leave her for dead.

"Take me back," I ordered.

"Fine. If we get attacked, you're on your own."

She grunted and turned tail, causing me to have to run after her. As we hurried back to where Agnes and I had been attacked, an unending flow of questions ran in my head, but I opted to remain silent. The eevee promised me an explanation once we were safe - for the time being, I needed to concentrate on what was happening around us, and on not letting my thoughts or my emotions get the best of me.

I wanted to take revenge. I wanted to go back to the unconscious humans and kill them. I wanted to do unspeakable things to them until they begged for mercy. I wanted them to die in agony. Without the eevee staying close to me to encourage me to follow, I might have actually gone back and done things I would have regretted.

Odours violently returned to me as we finally stepped out of the dark trees. A strong blue light emanated from the forest and illuminated the strange dirt road before me.

It revealed that the road was covered in pokemon footprints - and in blood.

"This way," the eevee said.

She led me along the edge of the forest, and it wasn't long until a familiar scent came back to me. It was Agnes'.

I ran ahead of the eevee, following my nose, trying to ignore the overwhelming smell of blood mixing with my trainer's wonderful personal scent and the remnants of the disgusting rot that accompanied the humans. I began crying as I came across an enormous puddle of fresh blood. Hers.

Her body and belongings, however, were missing.

"Where is she?"

"The haunter took her, duh."

"They wouldn't have taken her belongings."

"Then the humans did."

I couldn't hold my tears back anymore as I stood by the edge of what was left of my human - the person I had come to love. She had saved my life, and I had failed her. The beacon had been useless.

The beacon.

I began furiously sniffing around the area, and quickly noticed smells of people I didn't recognise, accompanied with smells of growl. There was a faint smell of metal just a few steps away from where Agnes had been.

Was that police? Had the distress signal worked? Had they come in time to rescue her, or only to pick up her body and gear? Could she still be alive?

"I'm smelling other humans," I said. "Maybe..."

"Are you coming or not? We don't have time to play find the human. The hunter will come back. We need to get to safety before they do. Or before they bring a gengar."

"What do you mean they will come back? What safety?"

The eevee violently shook her head.

"What were you thinking, taking your human so close to the forest edge? These are hunter hunting grounds. What do you think the lights are for? Why do you think everyone avoids it?"

"Wait, what? Hunting grounds? The lights?"

She didn't have time to reply. With an alarmed bark, she rolled forward, dodging a spectral claw that came from the forest. Without saying anything, she puffed her body up and growled, then dashed away.

It took me a moment to make a decision. Seeing the spectral claw of the hunter made my blood boil with primal rage I did not know I was capable of. Overwhelmed with hunting instincts and bloodlust, I already pictured myself eating the hunter with the predatory satisfaction of a successful kill, enjoying my meal even more because I was avenging Agnes. However, my defeat in the earlier battle and my failure to save my trainer came back to me, and I conquered my own thoughts to run after the eevee, keeping an eye on the hunter who remained under the safety of the haunted forest.

I wasn't sure how long we ran, but we ran so much that I was exhausted by the time the eevee finally stopped. We were still in the forest, but the one with the bright and thin trees. The ambient sounds of pokemon and animals were so loud compared to the deafening stillness of the Gloss Forest that the pounding in my head resumed tenfold. Eevee, however, sighed with relief.

"Good enough," she said. "Let's take a break and we'll go back to my den."

"Hold on, Eevee. What is going on? How..."

"Later. Let me find some food first. You can wait here if you want, the hunter don't go beyond the dirt strip."

She disappeared before I could reply, and I collapsed in place, panting heavily.

Agnes was dead. Maybe. At least dying. Or severely wounded. With the same wound that I had.

Could she survive? I had. Why would she not? She was stronger than me.

But I hadn't. My body had died - and revived when I claimed it. And I was in a pokemon centre.

Had she been taken to a hospital? Had the distress signal worked? Did police arrive in time? Those scents definitely were policemen. Had they saved her? Was she going to die too?

Was she going to turn into a pokemon?

Had she been taken by those masked humans? What was the laboratory? Were the attacks just parts of experiments? Were those experiments why I had become a vulpix?

What were the haunter doing? They didn't even have names. Were they the men's pokemon? Wild pokemon just helping? Then why? What was this hunting grounds thing all about?

How had the eevee found me? How had she rescued me? Had she dealt with two humans and three haunter on her own? Then why run from that sole haunter who appeared?

How did she know my name?

She returned quickly after leaving. Her fluffy tail was stuffed with two large berries of a bright pink colour, which she dropped in front of me. She pushed one in my direction and began eating the other one.

"Eat," she said. "We should be safe here. At least for now."

It took me some time to bring myself to eat. The berry Eevee had picked was the one I had liked the most out of all the ones Agnes had me try. Yet, without her, the berry tasted bland.

"Those men," I eventually said. "Was it you?"

"I knocked them out, yes. The two haunter too."

"How?"

She stopped eating and stared me down.

"Do you think that two pets are a problem for a wild pokemon?"

"But you said you weren't strong and couldn't expand your territory?"

"Do you always blindly believe everything pokémon and humans tell you?"

She lied? Why lie about her strength? Was she testing my reaction to knowing she was weak? Was she trying to avoid something?

What else had she lied about?

"So you saved me."

"I did."

"Thank you."

She raised a single eyebrow and remained silent, probably waiting for me to say something. Facing my silence, she shrugged and resumed eating as I dug in my head to pick which questions to ask first.

"How did you find me? How do you know my name?"

"Did you forget we spent half a day playing together at the cold lake?"

She glared at me, shaking her head with disappointment. Abruptly self-conscious, I didn't dare ask anything else until we finished eating. The eevee stretched, her ears flopping above her head as they scanned the area, and turned around.

"Let's go to my den."

"I can't. I need to go back home. I need to see Topa."

"Are all pets this stupid? You can't go back home. The forest isn't safe now. Those humans will be hunting you down and if they're bringing hunter again, you're dead. Hide somewhere for a few days and you'll be able to go home."

"I can't afford to hide. Topa will worry. I need to find Agnes."

"Then go on your own and don't whine when you get killed. I don't care."

Her abrupt coldness threw me off and I remained silent. Her behaviour was so different from what I remembered of the lake trip. She had never been very friendly, but she was receptive to friendliness. She even overcame her dislike of humans to play with Agnes and Melissa. Was that something common with wild pokemon? Were they all this cold and serious in their daily lives?

"Why are you so cold?" I whined.

"You're being an idiot. I took a huge risk attacking them to save you. You need to lay low."

"I can't just sit quietly while my trainer is missing!"

"And what are you going to do? Chase them down? That's death and you know it. Go back to the town? To do what? You said it yourself, you smelled other humans. Either they took your trainer or the ones with the haunter did. In either case, there is nothing you can do."

"What about Topa?"

"She will learn soon that your trainer is dead. Do you want her to also learn that you died because you didn't have the intelligence to wait until it was safe to return to her?"

Could she wait a couple days? Could she handle the idea that I disappeared like her son had? Would she believe my promise?

Would I be able to keep my word? I certainly wouldn't if I got killed trying to rush home. Maybe the eevee was right. I couldn't do anything for Agnes at this point, and there was no point in taking unnecessary risks.

"Fine, I'll follow you. But promise me you will escort me home."

"Sure. In a few days."

"All right."

She began walking at a fast pace, ignoring my exhaustion, and stopped talking. I didn't have the courage to prod her more, and the focus I needed to keep going helped me keep my mind away from the questions that were haunting me.

It took us almost the full day to reach her territory. When she finally became less tense and said that we were close, the sun had already begun to set. Apart from the two berries we had eaten after escaping from the forest, we had not had any food.

Eevee let out a deep sigh of relief after we passed some particularly dense bushes that led us into a tiny clearing covered by large trees with low branches. The dimming light of the setting sun that made it through the thick leaves coloured the area with comfortable orange hues. Away from the entrance was a nest made of dead leaves and branches that the eevee offered me to lay on. She disappeared through the side of her den and returned quickly after with more berries to eat.

"Finally," she said. "Eat. I'm sorry I didn't hunt any prey, but I'm not taking any chances."

"It's fine."

I reluctantly ate the sour berries she gave me, laying by her bed as it was too small for me, wondering what her normal diet consisted of and what kind of prey she usually hunted. Part of me was relieved that I didn't have to eat a mouse or bird, especially not if it was still alive.

"You had questions," the eevee said.

She laid on her bed, snatching half a berry from me to quietly eat it while we were discussing.

"I have too many, I don't know where to start. I'm..."

I wasn't sure what to say. I couldn't bear with the idea that Agnes was dead. She had to be alive, somehow. Police had rescued her. She would be fine. She couldn't die.

"It hurts, doesn't it?" she said.

"What?"

She licked my cheek, cleaning it of a tear I hadn't realised had fallen.

"Losing your human."

I quietly nodded, fighting myself not to cry.

"Don't lose yourself," she advised. "You have a few days for yourself. You can either spend them in agony, or you can use them to better yourself and plan what you will do once you return home. Focus."

She was right. After all the effort I had made to overcome my initial depression, I couldn't let myself fall right back into it. I had no evidence Agnes was dead. I knew she was wounded. I knew that policemen had come to the crime scene. I knew she hadn't been taken by the white men - only I had, and eevee had rescued me. That meant that she had been taken by police, and there was a chance she was still alive.

And I had to protect her. Without failing. Eevee was right. I needed to focus. I could let things get to me once I was home safe. Once I was with Topa.

I took a deep breath to control myself.

"How did you beat the haunter?" I asked. "They are Ghost-type."

"Do you think I only know Normal-type moves? Or that it's the first time I've had to fight haunter? I know how they fight. These ones

were dumbed down because they cooperated with humans. I took them out first, then it was easy."

"How did you find me? Why did you rescue me?"

Her ears jolted up for a second before she looked away.

"I like you," she confessed. "You're the first pokemon I ever got to play with since my tribe rejected me. You didn't toss me away because of the colour of my fur. You liked it. Your humans liked it. It was the first time since my birth I felt like I was being respected."

"Agnes is very respectful," I whispered. "When I was wounded, she..."

"Hey."

Eevee stared me down with mild anger in her eyes to snap me out of what was going to become sorrowful reminiscing.

"You talked about hunting grounds. About the lights."

"The forest with the dark trees is hunting grounds for a host of Ghost-type pokemon. Pokemon know to avoid it because we know what's happening, but animals don't."

"What do you mean?"

"A lot of them are capable of toying with an animal's senses. Mostly sight and smell. Did you not notice that you couldn't smell anything while in there?"

My eyes widened as the realisation came to me. That was why the bodies had no scent. That was why the white men had associated with haunter. Using the haunter's power to modify senses, they could cover their traces perfectly. The white hand was probably just an illusion meant to scare humans away while their pokemon were lost because of their senses disappearing. It had probably been used by the haunter for decades and started the ghost stories that

surrounded the Gloss Forest, and now that group of people were using them to their advantage.

Then what about the door in the manor?

"Do humans not know about that?"

"Of course not. They couldn't smell a corpse if they had one up their noses. They think that there are ghosts in the forest."

"What about the lights?"

"Those are defences from the pokemon that can live in the forest. The lights undo the haunter's powers."

Topa had said that she believed her Will-O-Wisp move was what lit up the forest at night, and what Eevee had just said corroborated that. That meant that the move was capable of undoing the haunter's powers.

That was probably why these people targetted fire-type pokemon specifically. Any fire-type who knew Will-O-Wisp could potentially uncover their secrets.

"I would have expected a vulpix to know that," the eevee said. "You have a move that does it, don't you?"

"No, I don't," I growled, abruptly annoyed. "If you're talking about Will-O-Wisp, I don't know that move. How would I know what it does?"

How would anyone, unless directly faced with the threat of a haunter playing with their senses? Topa was born in the manor, and as she said she would have liked to go to the forest, it implied she had never been there. Ilma, being a vaporeon, could not learn Will-O-Wisp, and couldn't possibly know about its effects. Had she known about the haunter's power, she would have easily linked them to the scentless body. That meant that she didn't know about any of it. The

only one I knew could possibly learn Will-O-Wisp was the director's absol, and he would have certainly intervened if he had been told about the lack of smell.

I was currently the only one who knew what was really going on.

"Why did the haunter not attack the humans?"

"They don't. Remember what the leaders said. It applies to us wild pokemon too."

So the story of the leaders was also known to wild pokemon. It wasn't something that pokemon had heard from humans and passed down from generation to generation.

"I need to go back," I said. "I need to tell police that."

"You need to lay low," the eevee replied. "You won't be good for anything if you get killed."

I wasn't good for anything anyway.

I shook my head. I couldn't allow myself to start thinking that way again. I was holder of extremely precious information and I needed to make sure to deliver it to Ilma. Agnes had to be alive. I had to believe she was. I had to trust she could survive.

I had failed to protect her because I was too weak. Our teamwork was spot on during the fight. This defeat was on me, and it was she who bore the consequences of it.

"How strong are you, Eevee?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Why? Do you feel weak because you couldn't protect your trainer?"

I silently nodded, tears building up in my throat again.

"We had our first pokemon battle together not a week ago," I said, my voice wavering from my repressed tears. "We got wrecked. Agnes thought it was her fault but she didn't do anything wrong. We just weren't properly acting as a team. That's why we planned this whole trip."

The eevee had laid on her nest, listening with surprising attentiveness.

"It was supposed to help us mend our relationship and fix our teamwork," I continued. "Spending two days together bonding. I was looking forward to it. And then I had the idea to go to the Gloss Forest..."

"Wait. That was your idea?"

"I don't know what I was thinking. I thought we could protect each other, but I couldn't protect her. She did everything right. And then that human muffled her and I couldn't do anything. I'm useless without her."

"I know how you feel."

My ears jolted up as I stared at her in surprise.

"Not about the trainer bit," she added. "About feeling useless. Feeling like you're dependent on others to protect you. When I was born, my tribe didn't immediately reject me. They only did after they realised that the colour of my fur made us easy to spot in the rocky terrain we lived in. We were attacked by a flock of fearow. Not all of us made it out, and when we retreated to our cave, everyone blamed me. I was even attacked by other eevee and they beat me to a pulp. They carried me out and left me to get eaten by other predators."

"When was that?"

"A few years back. I can't say I've counted. But I wasn't eaten and I walked away from them."

I hadn't considered the possibility that pokemon would eat other pokemon. Based on what Topa had said, I thought pokemon were at the top of the food chain, with no animal predators, but I hadn't paused to wonder what could possibly eat a pokemon.

The eevee sighed. "I felt useless. I couldn't defend myself from my own tribe. Without them protecting me, I was certain I wouldn't last long in the wild."

"What did you do?"

"I fled first. Walked until I didn't meet any wild eevee. I had to fight a lot through my travel, but I always either won or escaped. I had heard of the snowy mountain here and I thought I could find something here that would help me become stronger."

"Did you?"

"In a way, yes. I forced myself to brave the snow and the cold. I fought pokemon I didn't even know existed. But, over time, I became stronger. I claimed a small patch of land by the snow so I could return there whenever I wanted to keep training. Now I have a group of pokemon I can train with."

I was the one who sighed. "Was that all you did? You went to the snow and fought?"

"Pretty much. You have to understand that fighting skill only takes you so far. You have to improve your powers, and the only way to do that is to push them to their limits."

"Can you take me there?"

She stood and nodded.

"Let's go."

"What? I had no time to rest. I'm exhausted."

"My training grounds aren't that close and we will be safer under the cover of the night in this part of the forest. Think of this as the beginning of your training."

I reluctantly followed, fuelled by a mix of despair and resolve. My exhaustion was slowing my step, but the eevee seemed to still have reserves of energy to go by and didn't adapt to me.

Topa's estimate of a day to reach the White Hat was grossly erroneous. It only took us a few hours to reach it. Similar to the dirt path that surrounded the Gloss Forest, the snow before us ended abruptly in an almost perfect line. I stood before it, hesitant, remembering the conversation Topa and I had with the eevee when we were at the lake, until Eevee pushed me and forced me to step onto the snow.

It wasn't as cold as the eevee had implied back at the lake. I would have expected the temperature to drop violently, but it was just a bit colder than the lake and still comfortable to walk through.

Once we passed the border of the snow, my companion accelerated again.

Except for everything being covered in a thick layer of white, the landscape hadn't changed. The forest, albeit slightly more dense, was made of the same trees as the one we had just left. I found myself relieved that the sun had set and it was night; the snow would have been blinding during the day.

There was something soothing about the freshness and colder temperature of the air as we walked deeper into the snowy mountain. Although Agnes' fate still occupied the majority of my thoughts, my anxiety had significantly come down and I was able to focus more clearly on my thinking. The forest's eerie silence amplified by the snow helped me calm down as my senses only picked up distant sounds and smells of normal night activity - no ghostly white hands or haunter to give me unnecessary reminders of what I had just been through. Eevee, strutting by my side and

peeking back regularly to make sure I was keeping up, kept her nose by the ground to orient herself, and I poured all my trust in her sense of direction, focusing instead on combating the exhaustion that was slowly overtaking me.

We walked most of the night, stopping only occasionally to have a bit of food we came across. Although Eevee didn't seem to be too alarmed, her rapidly flicking ears showed she was wary, and she was jumpy when I made unexpected noises. We hadn't met any other pokemon despite walking for hours, and the few smells I bothered picking up were old and faint. Eevee hadn't lied when she said that few pokemon dared venture deep in the snow - whichever ones did had to be remarkably strong, which was probably why she had grown to be so strong herself.

And I was going to fight those very pokemon for a few days.

My thoughts redirected themselves to Topa as we began climbing a rocky area outside of the forest. By morning, if she hadn't already, she would learn that Agnes was dead or dying, and that I was missing. There was no doubt the news would destroy her, and yet, I was hiking with a wild eevee to go fight wild pokemon in order to become stronger. She should have been a priority for me - at the very least to let her know I was safe and would return. Instead, I was forcing her to wait in anxiety, not knowing if I would ever come back, and probably convinced I wouldn't.

"We're there," Eevee said.

She sat by the enormous entrance to a large cave that dug into the mountain.

"Your training partners are in the cave?"

"Of course. What do you think would happen if we fought out in the open? We need somewhere safe to stay in case one of us gets knocked out."

I lowered my head to sniff the ground. I recognised one of the scents to be the eevee's, and it was still strong, showing she had been in the area recently. The other major scent I could pick up was entirely unknown to me.

"Let's go."

We stepped into the cavern, sounds becoming strangely muffled as they resonated on the rocky walls. It wasn't long until I couldn't see much anymore, and the eevee didn't let me use my fire to create light and had me bite her tail to make sure I wouldn't get lost. Finally, after several minutes of walking in absolute darkness, a light progressively appeared before us, and we exited the cave into a large ice-covered clearing.

In its centre laid a large pokemon of a beautiful light blue colour with a long tail that was wrapped around it.

It was Articuno.

Chapter 44

The giant bird turned her head towards me and stood.

She was enormous - taller than Agnes herself, and probably three times as tall as I was. Like in the games, most of her feathers were of a perfect cerulean blue similar to the sky I had seen when I was in the lake, save for the ones on her stomach that took on a much brighter, almost white glacial colour. Her talons and beak were of an intense black shade, contrasting violently with the celestial beauty of her coat, and diverting attention away from her amber pupils that seemed to fill the entirety of her sockets. Unlike the games, she was perfectly thin, giving her body the beautiful shape of a bird of prey, complete with the three large groups of azure feathers that decorated her head. Her tail, finally, was longer than her entire body and probably as long as her gigantic wingspan, coloured the same way as the mane on her head, and comprised of thousands of small feathers that broke light up as it reflected upon them, shining a million mesmerising rainbows I couldn't take my eyes away from.

She was so beautiful that, for a moment, I forgot what I was actually facing.

My entire body began trembling as I clumsily bowed in submission, laying my head against the floor and daring only look through the top of my field of vision.

She chuckled, her heavenly voice resonating in my ears like peaceful sleigh bells filling the dampened air of a snowy winter.

"I appreciate the gesture, but you need not bow. Thank you, Eevee. You may leave for now."

The eevee gave a courteous nod and fled, leaving me alone with a monster of power I had not dared hope was real.

"So... Ruby, was not it? That is the name you were given?"

I nodded.

"I assume you are scared." I nodded again. "Do not be so cautious. I am no enemy. I suspect you have many questions, and I will answer them in due time. For now, I would like to talk to you."

I lowered my haunches to lay on my belly, still shaking.

That was Articuno I was facing. A legendary pokemon and, according to Topa, one of the nine leaders of all pokemon. She didn't radiate any power, making it impossible for me to gauge how strong she really was, but there was no doubt she could kill me without even thinking about it. After all, she was maintaining snow on top of a small mountain and it didn't seem to affect her.

And she was interested in talking to me.

Her head canted itself to the side. "You will get used to seeing me, I hope. Of all the pokemon I had the luck to meet, you have had the most fearful reaction. Understandable, given you used to be human."

My heart froze for a moment as she said that, and I frantically looked around before realising that we were alone in this clearing.

"Are you scared that your eevee friend heard? Fret not. She does not know, and I advise you not tell her."

"Why me?" I finally asked.

Articuno canted her head to the other side. "Of all the questions you could have asked, this is your first?"

"I'm sorry."

She chuckled again. "It is not an issue. You see, you are very special for two reasons. The first, obviously, is that you turned into a

pokemon. The second is that you did not just transform, but you also come from another world."

"How do you know?"

"Have you been told of the tale of the leaders?"

I gave a shy nod in response.

"It is true, at least for the most part. We really taught humans how to read and write, and when humans tried to enslave us, we disappeared and left instructions to obey docilely."

"Why?" I interrupted. "Why are pokemon still obedient to a legend? With all the power that they have?"

"Why are humans obedient to gods they cannot prove exist?"

The question made me frown.

"Does that mean you consider yourself a god?"

"In a societal way, yes, we nine are the equivalent of gods for pokemon. Of course, we have nothing in common with the human concept of god, but we do have the roles of protectors. I will not detail the duties of each of us, but we look after other pokemon now. Most of us still live in secret. Suicune only lets herself be seen when she deems it necessary or useful."

"How do you know about me?" I insisted.

"How could I not? Your appearance was most unexpected. Even Mew had no idea what happened. She left this world to investigate, and since you appeared within my territory, I was assigned the task to watch over you and make sure your existence did not have nefarious consequences for our world."

"Nefarious? How?"

"Like a parasite poisons its host, we feared that you may pollute our world by bringing something in that was not meant to be. Moltres originally suggested that you be eliminated for safety, and most others agreed."

My heart skipped a beat.

"The legends wanted me dead?"

"They have changed their minds since, for you have proven that you have a place for yourself in this world."

"Wait... does that mean you know what happened to me?"

"We do not know why or how you came into this world. All we know is that we had to do something. Since Mew and I disagreed with eliminating you, she decided that you should be given a chance to live a normal life. Suicune watched you at first, but when you were adopted into that human family, she ordained that you were not a threat."

My head began turning, causing me to fall to the side in confusion.

"Are you ill?"

"This is all too much to take," I whispered.

I couldn't bring myself to speak more as my jaw seemed to get locked open.

All the legends existed. And they knew about me.

The realisation made me tremble visibly. Was I being constantly watched still? Was I unsafe because Moltres wanted me dead? Was that why the houndour had attacked me, using his sister's death as an excuse? Was that why I seemed to always get in trouble? Was it their doing?

How many other pokemon knew? Topa didn't know the leaders were real, given her surprise when I guessed that one of them may be living in the mountain near her house. What about Pico? Pride? Ilma? They had to know the story. Did they know the truth?

Something cold touching my back made me jolt up. Articuno had covered me with her soft tail.

"Take the time you need to process all this," she said. "You can ask me more questions afterwards."

What could I even ask? Her mere presence had me terrified mute. All I wanted was to get away and return to Topa and Agnes.

"Agnes," I whimpered.

"Agnes? Is that the name of your human?"

I nodded. "Is she alive?"

"I doubt it. She was rescued by police, but that was long after you were knocked unconscious. She would have bled out and died. You have my condolences."

I broke into tears.

I had been holding on to the sliver of hope that police had come in time to stop the bleeding and keep her alive. If what Articuno said was true, then there was no way she had survived. Agnes was dead. There was no hope left for me - who was I to question a pokemon god?

"What am I going to do?" I whined. "What can I do without her?"

I repeated those questions repeatedly as I continued crying for several minutes, a soft feathery tail wrapped around me to cover me like a blanket, trying to comfort me.

When I finally stopped, I felt strangely clear to the point of being insultingly lucid. Agnes' death had become too real for me to be able to deny it anymore.

It was my fault. Going to the Gloss Forest was my idea. I had failed to warn her sufficiently early that something was amiss when I noticed smells were gone. I had failed to realise it in time. I had failed to protect her against the haunter.

How could I live with that?

"What do I do?" I asked, my voice shaking.

"If you do not wish to return to your humans, you could stay here with us," Articuno said.

What would that achieve? I didn't deserve to stay with someone like her. I should probably just leave and stay in the wild.

What about Topa? I couldn't just disappear on her. I couldn't abandon her, even to live with a legendary pokemon. Not after I promised to return. Not after she lost her son.

"No," I said. "I have to return to Topa. I can't abandon her."

"Topa? Is she the ninetales that was at the lake with you?"

"Yes. Wait, how do you know?"

"I know what happens in my forest."

"Then... the murders? The humans attacking fire-type pokemon? Did you know?"

Articuno gave me a grave nod.

"Why did you not do anything about it?" I asked.

"Why would I?"

My eyes widened as I stared at her, incredulous.

"They're... killing pokemon. Wasn't it your duty to protect other pokemon?"

"Yes, pokemon at large. A few murders are not endangering the existence of our species or the integrity of our world. It does not warrant intervention from any of us."

"But they're lives. Pokemon lives."

"There are things more important than lives."

How could she say something like that? Especially to me after I had just lost my trainer?

"I do not know what the humans are seeking to accomplish by killing specific types of pokemon," she continued. "I care not. If they begin trying to claim powers for themselves, then we will intervene, but a few isolated murders are not enough for us to."

"Do you know where they are? Where they're from?"

"I know they retreat underground. I never bothered trying to learn more. As I said, this is none of my concern. If you seek to stop them, I commend your heroism, but I urge you to be careful."

I emitted a low growl despite myself. "I don't seek to stop them. I'm going to kill them all."

Articuno canted her head to the side, observing me intently, but didn't reply.

"You should take some rest," she said after a long silence. "It is my understanding that you have not slept in over a day. Sleep before the exhaustion impairs your cognitive functions. We will discuss more when you wake."

She walked away from her nest in my direction. As I tensed up to the point of making my whole body ache from the strain, she gently lifted me with her beak and deposited me on the soft assortment of dead branches and leaves that her nest was made of. My tails reflexively covered my belly when I was in the air, and I remained immobile for a few seconds, staring at her.

"Rest," she said. "I will go and exercise while you sleep. Eevee will watch you until my return."

"Exercise? What if someone sees you?"

She just smiled and vanished into thin air.

I felt so warm.

I hadn't felt this comfortable since the first time I slept cuddling with Topa. Despite being out in the middle of nowhere, in a mountain of snow and ice, stuck inside a clearing concealed behind hidden caves, I was snuggling against something soft and warm that reminded me of the ninetales' beautiful fur. My eyes still closed, I stretched with a quiet moan, and pushed myself further into the softness.

"Are you awake?"

Articuno's voice violently jolted me back to reality. It wasn't Topa I had been cuddling with.

"I'm sorry!" I shouted.

I hurriedly extracted myself from the comfort of her belly, tripping over the side of her nest and crashing my muzzle into the hard ground below.

"What are you apologising for?"

"I..."

I wasn't even sure. Was it wrong of me to cuddle with her? To cuddle with someone other than Topa or Agnes? I had fallen asleep alone on the nest. She had to have returned to find me still sleeping, and she herself decided to cuddle with me.

"Did I startle you? You have my apologies. Given the emotional turmoil you displayed this morning, I presumed it would do you good to receive some affection and feel safe under my feathers."

"This morning?"

I looked up, surprised to notice that the sun was high in the sky. Contrary to what I was expecting, the snow was not blinding me with reflected daylight, but luminosity was still high, giving me an even better view of the beauty of the pokemon I was facing. Not far from us, also snuggling with Articuno, the eevee who had rescued me slept peacefully, her head resting on her fluffy tail.

"You came to me very early in the day. The sun had yet to rise. Have you lost track of time?"

"I... a little. I think I'm fine now."

What day was it? It was Friday when Agnes and I set out for the trip that wound up being deadly for her. After that, it was still night when the eevee rescued me, and we had spent a day walking and taking some rest at her nest. Then, we had walked some more through an entire night. That meant that roughly two days had elapsed since we left the mansion. It had to be Sunday.

That meant that Topa was expecting us to return soon, if she had not learnt of Agnes' death yet.

Tears filled my eyes again as my thoughts returned to my late trainer.

"Ah, you are going back to your emotions."

Articuno extended a wing, dragging me towards her nest with ease, until I was forced to climb back on her nest and lay under her again like an egg being brooded.

"Is this any better?"

I wasn't sure it was. Being snug under her and covered by her unfathomable power made me feel safe like I had never felt since I woke up as a vulpix, but I didn't feel at ease emotionally. She wasn't Topa. She wasn't Agnes.

I let out a deep sigh and pushed myself into her again.

She was right. I needed the comfort. The shock of Agnes' death wearing out left me with a void unlike anything I had ever felt - probably something similar to what Topa felt right now given the news of my disappearance, but to a lesser degree. Topa had the trauma of her son's death to make this experience worse. This was my first encounter with loss. And it would have been even worse for the ninetales had Eevee not rescued me.

"Articuno, I have a question."

She moved her entire head to look at me. "Speak."

"Why am I here? How did Eevee know where to find me?"

"Ah, now you are asking more interesting questions. I am relieved to see that your rest was effective."

She extended another wing, dragging berries towards me. After she nodded in reply to my looking at her as if to ask permission, I shyly seized one of them - the pink one that I fancied so much - and began slowly eating as she spoke.

"I sent Eevee to keep an eye on you when you stepped foot in the forest with your human," she said. "You were too close to the part of it where the attacks happened and I did not want you to be killed."

"Why did she not intervene?"

"She came too late. When she found you, you were gone. She had to track the humans down."

My eyes lowered themselves and I couldn't bring myself to keep eating. If I had stalled for longer, maybe the eevee could have saved us. Maybe she could have saved Agnes.

"Why did you have me rescued?"

"I have said it before, but you are special because of what happened to you. Since we have certitude now that your presence here is not nefarious, you earned your place in our world, and I have been curious to converse with you since you appeared. Eevee had the instruction to bring you here should anything happen."

"Converse with me?"

"I wish to know about humans and about your world."

She had me rescued out of sheer curiosity, while she had left all these other pokemon to die because she had no interest in them? How could a pokemon this pretty and this powerful be so self-centred and cynical? Did she value my life more than that of the pokemon she let die?

Unwilling to question her on her ethics, I spent some time telling her about the world I came from, or what I remembered of it - repeating only the information I had given to Topa. Her eyes widened as I mentioned the pokemon games, and she tried to press me for details on them, but I failed to satisfy her curiosity as I didn't remember much and I didn't dare go into depth because I wasn't sure I could differentiate between what I knew from the games and what I knew from this world. In particular, the tale of the second pokemon movie made her gasp, and she didn't fail to make the link with what she called the Three Hats - three mountains that herself, Zapdos, and Moltres had chosen as their homes, confirming my theory.

She smiled visibly by the time I finished my story, and thanked me wholeheartedly.

"What's going to happen to me now?" I asked.

"It should be safe for you to return home tomorrow if you wish to. Eevee will escort you. Although you declined staying here with me, I still have a proposition for you."

"A proposition?"

"Would you like to join my zealots?"

I blinked several times.

"Come again?"

"My zealots," she repeated. "A group of pokemon that assist me. I need eyes and ears on what is happening outside of my forest. You have met and befriended one of them already, and given that you have expressed curiosity in my mountain before, I wagered you would be interested."

"That... is not what zealot means."

Articuno canted her head to the side. "No? I heard humans mention this word a lot a few hundred years ago. I thought it meant servant."

"No, a zealot... nevermind. What would I have to do?"

"Simply pay heed to what is happening around you and report back to me if anything notable comes up."

Was that how she knew about what was going on in the world? She had a group of pokemon spies telling her? Was that how she had learnt about the attacks - likely from Eevee?

"Why me?"

Articuno glanced at the sleeping eevee.

"You know human society better than any of us pokemon ever will. You would be able to understand what they do and why. Your position as police pokemon and your status as former human make you perfect for this. If we leaders have one flaw, it is our inability to understand the minds of humans and predict what they might do."

She wanted to use me as a spy to remain one step ahead of humans. It was the only interest she, or the other legendaries, had in me - my transformation. She was asking me to betray what used to be my kind.

I tried to hide a wince, but Articuno's disappointed sigh told me I failed to.

"I don't think I'm suited for this," I said with a sigh. "I'm too weak. I don't know anything about pokemon. You need pokemon who can defend themselves. What do I even get out of it?"

"You will gain the power to speak directly to me no matter your location. This goes both ways, I will be able to converse with you as well."

"Telepathically?"

"It is a little different from telepathic speech, but you can think of it as such. I would not presume to know the intricacies of these powers as they were not mine to set up. You will also gain access to talking to or visit any other of the leaders should the need arise. If you fret over your power, I can train you until you are satisfied with your strength."

"You would train me?"

She smiled. "Of course. It would be hypocritical of me to request your help without giving you something in return."

"What if I refuse?"

"You have the right to. Nothing will happen to you, you have my word. I would simply request that you keep my existence a secret. It is not too dangerous for other pokemon to know, but I do need to keep this hidden from humans."

I nodded slowly. If humans had tried to enslave the leaders in the past, they would just try again if they learnt they existed. With improvements made to technology, they might just succeed - or try to kill the legendaries if they couldn't control them.

"How long do I have to decide?"

"I would like an answer before you leave."

I let out a deep sigh. "I accept then."

"Wonderful!"

She spread her wings wide, leaving me baffled as she batted the air a few times in excitement.

"Since you will not be staying with me for too long, let me train you for the few hours we have left. If you find a chance to, you may return to me to continue practising."

"Okay," I said. "What do I have to do?"

"Do you understand how to increase your power?"

I shook my head.

"You have to push them to their limits and beyond. Comfort is the enemy of progress, as humans wisely say. For that, you will fight me."

I blinked.

"Are you ready?"

"What? Wait-"

She threw a beam of ice at me, not giving me a chance to prepare for battle.

Articuno's training consisted in her shooting me with several different moves, knocking me out every time, before I was forcefully woken up and fed berries that Eevee would fetch to renew my aura, then knocked out again. I didn't have a chance to resist or fight back. Anything I tried to do failed miserably, and I spent the rest of the day being tortured. Yet, I did not question the effectiveness of her method. I wasn't sure I understood what she was doing, but something in me fully trusted that she was doing the right thing, and I was persuaded deep inside that I would take any amount of pain to avenge Agnes.

"Take care of yourself, Ruby," Articuno said. "And be careful when you return to face the humans."

"I will. How does the communication thing work?"

"We can communicate... telepathically, if you will, since that is the label you want to put on it. You can pray to me like humans pray to their gods, and I will listen. You are free to tell me anything you like, but I might not always reply. Please do not be offended if I remain silent. Understand you are not the only one talking to me."

"Okay. One last thing. Are you sure I can tell Topa about you?"

"I am. I agree to meet with her as well, if one day she wishes to."

"I'm sure she will. Thank you."

I quickly turned around to peek inside my tails, making sure I hadn't lost the feather Articuno had given me as a gift for Topa when we had discussed her case the night before. Standing still like a guard, Eevee waited by the entrance to the clearing. The large bird gently pecked on my head and watched me join the eevee. I turned around

one last time before leaving, my heart heavy with loss - not just Agnes', but the disturbing feeling I would never get to see such a beautiful pokemon again.

It took us the entire day to walk through the forest. We reached the cold lake first, where we took a short break to drink, and where I cried as I remembered the wonderful time I had spent with my trainer there and my failure to seize the opportunity to finally cuddle with her - which I now knew I would never get to do. Surprisingly, the eevee let me mourn and express my emotions for as long as I needed to, not interrupting until I was done crying, when she walked up to me and deposited herself against my flank. I didn't keep her there too long, for I wanted to return to Topa and make sure my disappearance had not destroyed her, but I appreciated her effort to comfort me, all ineffective it was.

My stomach turned when the shape of the Trokair manor appeared between the trees. Eevee refused to progress past that point, and I gave her genuine thanks as she withdrew. Heavy was my heart as I walked along the fence until I finally came back to the entrance.

The gigantic portal was closed, but as soon as I turned the corner, familiar barks resonated from inside the beautiful gardens. I rushed to the front of the building as the metallic gate opened slightly. Topa sat behind it, frozen solid.

I threw myself into her when the portal was open and the guards barked orders to fetch someone from the house. Her tails wagged so violently that they moved the bottom of her body with them and pushed so much air I could feel it.

"I'm back, Topa," I wailed. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

She opened her muzzle to reply, but all that came out of it were whimpers and tears.

"I've got something for you," I said.

I turned around and dug in my tails, pulling out a short covert feather of a white glacial shade that was as long as my muzzle, and presented it to Topa.

She canted her head to the side, sniffing at the feather.

"Take it and hide it," I said.

She didn't question me as I stuffed the feather into her tails before hugging her again. She began licking the top of my head as Rakuen and Agnes' parents rushed to me, accompanied by the guard that had alerted them.

"You!" Madam roared. "This is all your fault!"

Her husband seized her arm as she stomped in my direction.

"Calm down. None of this is her fault."

"It is! Agnes had to go to the forest because of her! Because-"

Sir almost shouted as he strengthened his grip on her. "Calm down."

Agnes' mother paled and remained quiet, staring at me with hatred in her eyes. I had seen that hatred before, twice - once in the pokemon centre as I was being strangled, and once by the houndour that had attacked me.

"Go back to our room," he ordered in a loveless tone. "Rakuen, call the pokemon centre to warn them we have found Ruby and will bring her in immediately, and fetch me my car keys." He pointed to two of the guards. "You two, tour the property to make sure she was not followed. Topa, you will be coming with me."

I tensed up as he walked to me, thinking I was going to be yelled at for disappearing, but he put a gentle hand on my head and began carefully petting me.

"Welcome home, Ruby", he said. "We were all worried for you. We're going to the pokemon centre to get you checked out now. You're safe."

I nodded and pushed myself into Topa again. She covered me with her tails and licked my cheek.

"Welcome back, Ruby. Thank you for coming back."

I gave her a lick in reply as Rakuen returned with Sir's keys, and he beckoned for her, Topa, and I to follow him to the pokemon centre.

Chapter 45

"She is healthy," Nurse Joy said.

She took her stethoscope out of her ears, hanging it around her neck, and gently deposited a hand on my back while her other one reached for my belly. I couldn't help but tense up when her fingers made contact with the sensitive skin of my scar, but surprisingly, there was no pain. She palpated my lower abdomen for a few seconds.

"Her scar hasn't suffered any damage either. I can't believe I'm saying this after what happened, but she just needs some rest and some food and she will be back up in a day."

Sir put his hand on my head in an attempt to be comforting, but it made me jolt and lower my head submissively.

"That is a relief," he said.

"What will you do?" the nurse asked.

Sir lowered his head for a moment. "I would like you to keep Ruby here for a few days to keep an eye on her. Topa will return with me to the mansion. I... need to talk some sense into my wife."

"Police will likely want to see Ruby. Should I-"

"Let them," Sir interrupted. "It's important. Let Ruby tell them whatever she knows. Let them catch the bastards who tried to kill my daughter, and God help me if I lay my hands on them before police does."

I couldn't repress a loud whimper at the mention of Agnes' death. My whole body lowered itself in defeat as I let out a mournful sigh. Yet, at the same time, I felt some relief - Sir's anger, albeit remarkably contained, proved that he did love his daughter.

Wait, tried?

Sir peered at me and gave me a reassuring smile. "I am not angry at you, Ruby. I am angry at the people who did this to her." He turned to Nurse Joy. "Would you leave me alone with her for a while? You too, Rakuen. Topa, you can stay with us."

Nurse Joy nodded and left the room without a word, the maid in tow. As they closed the door after their exit, my entire body tensed up, and my owner turned to me.

"I am not angry at you, Ruby, I promise. I am relieved that you've returned. I just wanted to ask you a few questions about what happened. Police said that you were nowhere to be seen when they found her. Given that she suffered the same wound as you did, they believe you were taken. Is that true?"

I nodded slowly, staring at him in fear.

"I have no doubt that you fought as much as you could, and for that, you have my gratitude. Don't blame yourself for-" he choked on his words then took a deep breath. "I don't know if you know, but Agnes is not dead. She's in a coma. We- we don't know if she's going to wake up or not."

Topa walked into her master and rubbed herself against his legs. My ears perked up, my body filled with hope I didn't know I had giving me strength as the ninetales received thankful pets from her owner.

Agnes was alive. Unconscious, but not dead. I had no doubt she could survive - I had, so why would she not? She was alive and she was going to wake up soon. Then I could take care of her while she recovered like she did for me, and we could go back and catch those humans and their haunter.

Of course, Topa couldn't have told me. I had laid on her in the car, crying or whining, and she was too shocked to say anything. I had no

doubt that she was burning to tell me Agnes had survived, but I had not given her any opportunities to.

I wanted to see Ilma. The idea that police would visit me for my testimony was almost reassuring. The vaporeon would come and be able to give me some reassurance - which Sir was failing to do.

He walked to the bed on which I laid and knelt down to pet me.

"I'm proud of you for defending her. I know I never spend any time with you or Topa because my job never allows me to, but I know you need reassurance right now."

Topa jumped on the gurney and laid next to me.

"I envy you," she whispered.

"Why?"

"Sir never cared for me like this."

I wasn't sure what to reply and simply laid my head on hers.

"Don't be sad," Sir said. "Agnes will wake up. I will take you to visit her once you've fully recovered. For now, take some rest and focus on that, alright? She's doing the same on her end. Trust her."

I nodded without conviction. Topa, still laying by my side, extracted herself from under my head and changed her position to cover me with her beautiful tails. Sir gave us both some pets and stood, a broken smile on his face.

"You know..."

A sad chuckle interrupted his sentence, and his mouth wavered as he lifted his head to the sky with a deep breath. After a couple seconds, he lowered it again, his eyes shimmering.

"Never mind," he said. "Get some rest. We'll go see her soon. Topa, let's go."

I barked in his direction then shuffled deeper into her cover.

"You want her to stay?"

I nodded.

"I'll go ask Nurse Joy."

He wasn't gone for too long, and the doctor allowed Topa to stay the night saying that I probably needed the emotional support the ninetales would provide, especially given that my first experience in a pokemon centre had been traumatic and I was likely in a state of shock. She was wrong on that end, but I understood her concern, and was silently grateful to her and Sir both for being so understanding. Before leaving, Agnes' father gave Topa and I a kiss on the head each, and promised that his daughter would wake up and recover.

Topa and I didn't say anything after that and waited until a nurse placed a cage on our shared bed, like in my first trip to the pokemon centre. We huddled together and I finally allowed myself to cry for my trainer once more, my head buried in the ninetales' fluff, with her licking my back amidst her motherly cuddles.

Nurse Joy was the one who woke us in the morning, bringing us a small bowl of the same dry food I had eaten in my first stay in the pokemon centre, as well as some fresh water. Topa jolted awake and looked around in confusion when the doctor switched the lights on, but quickly remembered what situation we were in and stretched to relax.

Before I was allowed to eat, Nurse Joy insisted on giving me one more check-up, and I didn't protest when she touched me the same way she had the day before. She nodded to herself and smiled to me

before allowing me to eat, then left the room, fiddling on a mobile phone.

"How are you feeling?" Topa asked.

I let my head drop with a sigh and laid down next to her.

"Agnes is alive," I replied. "I should... I don't know. I'm relieved. I'm scared. I'm lost. What if Agnes doesn't wake up? Why did Madam get so angry at me? What will happen to us from here on? The whole forest trip was my idea and-"

"Allow me to interrupt you. Agnes's predicament is in no way your fault. You taught me not to needlessly assign myself blame. Please do not make the mistake I made."

She made a nest of her tails for me to lay into, which I happily obliged.

She was right. I had called her out on her self-assigned blame and helped her out of it. I couldn't fall in the same trap. Despite my failure to protect her, Agnes was still alive. She was going to wake up. I had become stronger thanks to Articuno's short training. I could just train more and get even stronger. I wouldn't fail to protect her again.

Had I failed? I had pushed the emergency button of her beacon. She had been rescued by police, and apparently, they had managed to save her life. That meant that, in a way, I was responsible for it. Police only reached her in time because I pushed the button before the fight began. Police saved her life because of me.

That meant that, all in all, I had saved her life.

The idea significantly boosted my mood - right in time as the door opened, and Doctor Belish and the commissioner came in, both in uniform complete with the hat and bearing all of their medals. Ilma and the director's absol were with them.

"Thank you, Nurse Joy," the commissioner said.

The door closed itself behind her. Ilma stepped forward slightly, staring at Topa.

"Let me hop on," she said.

I nodded at the ninetales and we scooted backwards to give her room to jump onto the bed. Topa gasped when she did, staring with shocked eyes at her damaged side. Huddling back, she whined quietly and laid her head and ears low, staring alternatively at Ilma and, to my surprise, at me.

"You are Topa, I presume?" Ilma asked in a neutral tone.

Only then did I realise that this was the first time that the two had met - Topa's terror had to be from feeling how powerful Ilma was.

My eyes turned to the absol quietly sitting by his master as he and Belish observed the situation. I didn't feel any power emanating from him, nor had I ever, leaving me clueless as to how powerful he really was - and making him all the more dangerous.

Surprisingly, Ilma's own aura felt less overwhelming than what I remembered when we had first met that day in the school. I was probably just used to it, given how much time I had spent in her company, but Topa had been caught off-guard by the vaporeon's ridiculous power just like I had.

"I'm Ilma, an instructor in the police school. I have spent quite a deal of time with Ruby. I heard you took care of her, and I have to commend you on your results."

"I have heard of you," Topa replied in a whimpering but polite tone. "In good only."

"Likewise. I didn't think I would meet you here."

"If my presence is problematic, I can leave."

"It isn't. I was just expressing surprise."

I stared at Topa and Ilma, shocked by the strange shift in attitude when they interacted with each other. Topa had a respectfully distant tone I had never heard from her, and Ilma spoke to her like she would speak to an equal. I had never considered the possibility that the vaporeon could give anybody this much respect.

Ilma turned to me. "I heard what happened to you and Agnes, Ruby. I'm happy you're safe. And I'm sorry about Agnes."

It was strange hearing those words from her, but I didn't doubt them for a second.

"Agnes is alive," I replied. "She will wake up. She's going to be fine."

Ilma smiled - it was a transient, almost proud grin, and certainly not something I expected to see in these circumstances.

"I suppose we will have time to talk about that another time. Doctor Belish and the commissioner wanted to see you."

She stepped to the side and sat on the bed, nodding towards her trainer. The commissioner and he both approached, but the absol stood by the door.

"Ruby," Doctor Belish said. "I'm glad to see you're alright."

"Me too," the director said. "I think we owe both you and Agnes apologies."

I barked loudly to deny.

"We're doing the necessary to keep this from the ears of the media. I'd rather you keep this story to yourself as long as you can. You are the holder of potentially life-saving information and we need to make sure nobody hears of this attack. We don't want people to panic."

I nodded.

"You don't have to say anything yet. Focus on resting. Doctor Belish and I are working with the mayor to take measures in response to the attack. We will ask you for your information eventually, so ready yourself for that."

"I don't want to wait," I said. "A group of humans-"

"Quiet," Ilma interrupted. "We can talk about this later. Take some rest."

"Why do you want to wait?" I asked. "We don't have time. We can't afford to wait."

"We are closing down the forest for good. No entry except for police squads. This will take a bit of time to implement, so until then, there is no point in fretting."

"Ilma is right," Topa intervened. "You need to focus on restoring your energy. The information you hold will not be lost, and for now, police must focus their efforts on closing down the Glossy Hills."

Ilma glared angrily at Topa. "Just how much do you know about this case?"

"I know what Ruby shared with me. I have helped her brainstorm and we have worked on it together."

"That's true," I said. "Topa's helped me prepare for the trip, too."

Ilma remained silent for a few seconds, staring the ninetales up and down. To my surprise, Topa challenged her gaze with measured pride.

"Good. That will save me having to explain from the beginning, then. Topa, I would very much like to speak to you one day."

"When circumstances allow, it would be my honour."

Ilma smiled - leaving me in shock. As she turned around to hop down the bed, the door opened with violence. Nurse Joy held a phone in her hand, shaking mildly.

"Excuse me, Ruby, Commissioner," she said. "I have received news from the hospital. Agnes is waking up. She is still mostly unconscious, but it is expected she will become fully aware very soon."

I jolted up on the bed, my tails wagging with fury. Doctor Belish peered at me.

"Commissioner, I'll take Ruby to the hospital right away."

"Do it," the director replied. "I guess this chat will have to be delayed."

Doctor Belish gestured to Ilma to follow her.

"Come with us," the vaporeon said. "You can come with us too, Topa."

She hopped off the bed and barked at her trainer, who simply nodded, and beckoned for us to follow him.

I had trouble containing my euphoria as I jumped onto the floor and went after Ilma. Topa followed us with significantly more composure, her tails floating beautifully behind her. She and Ilma were about the same size, but Topa's remarkable stance and the size of her tails made her the sole focus of attention.

I didn't pay any mind to anything as I was driven to a large human hospital, sitting in the back of a patrol car with Ilma and Topa. Neither of them spoke any words, making the long trip quite tense and turning my euphoria into anxiety.

We didn't go to the main entrance - the police car instead swerved away from it and took the portal that led to the ambulance entrance

into the ER. A nurse waited for us there, wearing a uniform identical to the one I had seen on Nurse Joy, except for the white hat with a cross that was absent. She didn't comment on Doctor Belish being followed by three pokemon and hurriedly led us into an elevator.

"She began waking up about an hour ago. We didn't warn you directly because we weren't sure, but when she started being aware of what was happening around her, we immediately contacted the pokemon centre and her family. She's fully awake now, but she won't see anyone."

"Has she said anything?"

"We tried to get her to see her parents, but she refused. She wants to see her pokemon."

My heart skipped a beat when I heard that.

Of course she wouldn't want to see her parents. The last time she had been in a life or death situation, they hadn't bothered visiting her. She probably didn't even believe they would this time. She probably thought they would abandon her again since she firmly believed that they didn't love her.

But she wanted to see me. She believed that I loved her. She loved me more than her own parents.

And I loved her just as much.

"How is she doing?" Belish asked.

"Remarkably well, given what she suffered. Her vitals are stable but she's in a lot of pain. We put her on morphine for the time being." The nurse turned to me. "The medication is making her drowsy. Don't be scared, okay? She's fully awake. She's not in danger anymore."

I nodded to signify that I had understood, and we left the elevator, hurrying through the corridors to reach Agnes' room.

Her parents stood outside of it. Melissa had been given a foldable chair to sit on while waiting, and her mother laid against the door, trying to speak to her daughter.

"Agnes, it's us. We've come to see you."

I couldn't put words on how happy I was to hear Agnes' shattered voice come from the door in short panting bursts. "I don't want to see you. I want to see Ruby. Where is she?"

I walked up to the door, ignoring the potential danger that Madam was. Melissa turned her eyes to me as I did, then ran into Topa to hug her. Sir let me through without trouble, but Madam didn't seem to even notice me.

"Agnes, please."

"Let me see Ruby."

I stood on my back legs, putting my front paws on the door, and barked.

There was a long silence. Madam glared down at me and Sir ruefully seized her arm to pull her away from the door.

"Ruby?" Agnes called.

I barked again, my tails wagging with so much force that they made my hindquarters move with them, and began scratching at the door, whining loudly.

"Miss Trokair, this is the nurse. Your pokemon is here, she's trying to get in."

"Let her in, but not my parents."

Finally, the nurse opened the door, and I stepped into the room.

The room was a simple cube, Agnes' bed to the right of it. Behind it were series of machines I didn't all recognise, with various graphs monitoring her health and giving a regular beeping that quickly became annoying. Walls, floor, bedding, everything was white in this supernatural room where the ceiling lights shone brighter than the sun outside. A grey strip protruded from the wall, broken regularly by electric sockets, most of which were being used by the machines scattered around the bed.

It was an adjustable bed like in any hospital. Agnes laid in it, covered by the white sheets, the back at an angle to give her a more comfortable position. The tubes of a nasal cannula escaped from an oxygen mask that was strapped onto her nose and mouth with cords wrapping around her head and neck. Several more tubes dug into her left arm to transfer various liquids from pouches hanging from a tall metal pole attached to the bed.

We stared at each other for a solid few seconds, me standing by the door, and her laying in bed and groaning in pain.

Water filled her eyes as she lifted her oxygen mask to speak. "Come here."

The nurse put her hands around my shoulders to stop me from rushing to my trainer.

"Be careful," she said. "Agnes has a serious wound on her stomach. Don't walk on her and don't touch anything close to it, okay?"

I nodded with energy, whimpering and whining, shaking my entire body in an attempt to free myself from the grasp of the evil woman.

She let me go and I rushed to Agnes.

I became as careful as my euphoria let me when I jumped onto the bed, by her side. As soon as I in was range, she struggled to lift her

arms to pull me into her chest, tears flowing from her eyes wetting the top of my head as she held me as tightly as her weakened body allowed her to. Every time she initiated a sob, she gasped and choked instead, her body tensing up in pain, and resumed crying all the harder. I cried as well, head buried in her chest and being careful not to touch anything below her rib cage, my tails repeatedly slapping the side of the bed in a violent rhythm contrasting with the steady beeping of the machines tracking Agnes' vitals.

We wailed in each other's embrace for about a minute, the rest of the room having fallen in a deadly silence. The nurse had closed the door behind herself but not left the room, standing by the door instead, the only noise she made being her suspiciously calm heartbeat. The corridor had become less agitated, and Agnes' mother had fortunately stopped trying to get her attention.

When she finally let me go, I laid by her side, head against her breast, and she pulled the mask from her face again.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I couldn't keep you safe."

I shook my head with conviction, then lowered it, looking away.

"Don't blame yourself. I chose to take this trip. You fought so well, and you pushed the beacon for me. You saved my life. I'm proud of you, Ruby."

I had to fight myself not to start crying again. Agnes let go of her mask and put her hand around me again in an attempt to give me comfort.

"I am so happy you are unhurt."

Somebody knocked at the door. Before Agnes could say anything, the nurse opened it, allowing the director and Doctor Belish in. Ilma and Topa were with them. Agnes froze for a second, then gestured for them to walk in.

As the ninetales joined us on the bed and in celebrating Agnes' survival, the two policemen stood by the foot of the bed and took their hats off, holding them by their hearts.

"Sir, Doctor Belish," Agnes said. "I have info-"

Belish gestured to silence her.

"You can give us information later, when you can breathe on your own. Focus on resting. Jeez, you're just as restless as Ruby."

A shy smile stretched Agnes' mouth.

"We have come to formally apologise to you for what happened on Friday the 20th," the director said. "By allowing this trip, we bear responsibility for your wounds. We were aware that it might represent danger and sent you off insufficiently prepared."

"I disagree," Agnes said. A cough shook her, then a pained groan. "The emergency beacon saved my life. I would say that is a success."

"You should not have been wounded in the first place."

"I should not have required this trip either. If you want to blame someone, then blame me."

Belish and the director peered at her, then at me, and gave each other a meaningful glance.

"We've asked the hospital to keep us updated on your recovery," Doctor Belish said.

"That's fine."

The director let out a relieved sigh. "Given that you are out of commission for an unknown amount of time, Flick and Faith will be reassigned with someone else. We are still unsure how to handle

your training going forward as we've never had anything like this happen. We will discuss this another time."

"How long will I be stuck here?"

The nurse looked at the door handle as if to order it not to move, then stepped forward to speak.

"It depends on your personal recovery. You can expect to be in the ICU for at least a week. Your doctor will give you more information after your exams tomorrow."

"Thank you."

"Your parents and your sister want to see you. Should I let them in?"

Agnes peered at the door. "No. I'll see Melissa tomorrow, but I won't see my parents until I'm moved to another room."

Her decision made my heart ache. Even in this situation, in agony, having just barely survived a wound that had been fatal to so many pokémon, and with her entire family at the door of her hospital room, she could not bring herself to believe that she was loved. The only ones she accepted love from were Topa and I.

"We'll let you be for now, then," Doctor Belish said. "We'll drive Topa and Ruby back. The commissioner and I need to talk to your parents."

Agnes seized me and brought me close to her, making me jolt. I laid my head against her arm, barking quietly.

"Doctor Belish," she said. "I don't want Ruby to go back there. She deserves better."

"What do you mean?"

"My parents threatened to disown me if I moved out. So I'm going to do it and remove them from my life."

The two policemen stared at her in shock.

"Don't make any hasty decisions," the director said. "I will talk to your parents about this."

"You're wasting your time. I will move out no matter what. Until then, I don't feel like Ruby would be safe with my mom. She probably blames her for what happened."

"Then what?"

"Doctor Belish, can I ask you to take care of her until I'm out of the hospital?"

There was a long silence.

"You want me to adopt her for the time being?" Belish asked.

"I need you to care for her temporarily."

Topa peered at Agnes and barked.

"Not you, Topa, I'm sorry. You need to stay home and keep everyone safe. Melissa still loves you. Please spend more time with her."

"I don't mind," Belish replied in a sheepish tone. "What does Ruby think though?"

Eyes turned to me as I considered the idea.

I hated to be separated from Topa. She had just overcome depression and I had made myself the promise to play with her. I couldn't abandon her now and risk her falling back into it.

Agnes was right. Her mother was a danger for me. Staying at the manor was probably no longer safe, even with Topa to protect me and Sir trying to keep his wife in check. The prospect of living with Ilma was enticing, but having to let go of Topa, potentially for good, terrified me.

It was, however, Agnes' idea, and I knew she would find a way to make things work in the end.

I looked at Topa, my heart aching with love, and barked with confidence as I nodded. Her widened eyes and slightly ajar muzzle didn't let her speak.

"Thank you, Ruby. We'll be together again soon."

"Very well, then," Belish said. "I will get going. You focus on your recovery, Agnes. We'll visit again tomorrow."

"I will. See you tomorrow, Ruby. I love you."

She petted my head with force and gave me another weak hug before letting me go and pushing my back to tell me to hop off. She deported her attention to Topa as I did.

Ilma stood by her trainer in complete silence, her eyes slightly widened as I approached her. When she took notice of me, she sat down and smiled.

"What a strange turn of events," she said. "I am happy that Agnes survived and seems to be in such good spirits. I suppose I should welcome you in, then."

"Is this really okay with you?"

"Of course. We will take care of you until Agnes recovers."

"Thank you."

The commissioner, Belish, Ilma, and I left the room, sneaking past the nurse that held the door open for us. Agnes' mom tried forcing herself once we were out, but her husband held her back, saying that they shouldn't stress Agnes out by forcing her to see them if she didn't want to.

Melissa's distressed eyes broke my heart as she stood by the door, trying to peek in, but I couldn't bring myself to walk to her to try to comfort her. Topa exited the room shortly after we did and Melissa broke into tears as she knelt to hug her pokemon, who returned the embrace. She peered at me one last time before I turned the corridor and she disappeared from my view.

Chapter 46

Belish lived alone in a suburban neighbourhood south of the town, away from the hills and the dangers within, where houses could not compare to the mansion in size or beauty, but had nothing to envy to the boring apartments I expected to be in the town centre. His home stood out from the others in that it was the only one I had seen that had only one storey, and a smaller garden than the others, but was protected like the Trokair manor by a tall metallic fence.

He left his car parked by the main roadway - a superficially maintained concrete road that led up to a closed garage door on one end of the house - and walked Ilma and me towards a simple wooden door. I had little time to look at the garden and noticed only that the grass was overgrown and seemed to cover the entirety of it, with only a few trees randomly spread around, before I was gently pushed inside by an amused Ilma.

The door opened into a large room. To my right was a small but heavily furnished kitchen into which Belish immediately walked, dropping his keys on the central island and opening a fridge hidden behind a short wall. Ilma kept pushing towards the living room, which was mostly empty save for a large television on the wall to the left, next to a small window that opened over an even smaller table, and a sofa at the end of the room against its right wall that faced the television. The floor was made of a light beige wood that smelled wonderful and looked strangely matte, especially with the white walls violently reflecting the strong lights attached to the ceiling.

When I walked past the marble counter of the kitchen and the two bar stools waiting by it in the living room, a long corridor appeared to my right, leading to a closed window. The vaporeon pushed me towards it and passed three doors, all open - one immediately to my right that led to a grey bathroom, one facing it that led to the unique bedroom, and one at the end of the corridor that led to the garage. Next to that one was a downwards staircase.

"We will go there later," Ilma said as she noticed me peeking. "Don't worry about it for now. Come."

She led me back to the living room and jumped on the sofa. By its side was a large cat bed of a deep blue colour tucked in a corner and hidden by the large piece of white furniture she invited me to hop on.

"I'm not allowed to go on the sofas if there isn't a human on it," I whispered.

Ilma stared at me with wide eyes. "Not allowed? Whyever for? Are they scared you will set fire to the sofas?"

"I don't know. It's the rule."

"The rule?" She blinked repeatedly. "When you said your household had strict rules, I was expecting something different. Rules that make sense. Not... random interdictions. Are you sure your family isn't just forbidding you from doing things for the sake of having power over you?"

"I don't know. I never questioned anything. I didn't want to get in trouble."

Ilma opened her mouth with an angry frown as if to reply, but was interrupted by Belish sitting down next to her on the sofa. He deposited a bowl of what smelled like coffee and a few bits of pastry on the table, then gave his pokemon a bit of dry food with heavenly fragrances. Ilma ate it with a happy bark.

Belish extended a hand to give one to me.

"No idea what the rules Agnes mentioned in the pokemon gym are, but in here, there are no rules," he said. "You're free to do what you want. Ilma and I have our habits, and you are welcome to insert yourself in them while you're here."

He waved the treat in front of me and I reluctantly agreed to eat it - letting out a happy bark just like the vaporeon had.

"If you have any questions or want to do anything, don't hesitate to ask her."

He sipped on his coffee and laid back on his seat, bowl in hand. Ilma immediately stood and laid on his lap, closing her eyes as he began scratching her head behind her fins.

The room remained silent for a few minutes. Belish drank his coffee slowly and never stopped petting his pokemon, who laid on his lap with a gentle wag of her tail making a constant noise as it rubbed against the leather of the sofa, and I sat by their side, watching with stupor.

It was difficult to imagine that the strong, heartless soldier and instructor I had met by the school's pools was the same vaporeon as the adorable and loving pet that chirped in happiness from her master's strokes. Even at her most vulnerable, when she told me what had happened to her in the war, I had not once thought that she could love anybody, and yet, she was shamelessly expressing how deep her love was for her human. They weren't even doing anything other than enjoying each other's company.

Finally, Belish finished his bowl with a satisfied sigh, and gave the cup to Ilma who hopped on the floor, running to the kitchen. He stretched with a groan, and turned his head to me.

"Come here, Ruby," he said, tapping his lap. "Ilma isn't jealous, she won't be angry at you if I pet you."

I stepped back with trembling eyes as the vaporeon returned and jumped back on Belish's lap. She gave me a sorrowful peek, but didn't insist, and laid on his chest instead of his legs, licking one of his hands that he had given to her.

"Are you sure you don't want to join?" Belish insisted. "From what I understand, you don't get much attention from Agnes outside of school."

"You should join," Ilma said. "If you are too embarrassed to cuddle with me, I will hop off and let you cuddle with him instead."

"It's not that. I -" My throat collapsed. "- I don't want to cuddle anyone other than Agnes. It doesn't feel fair to me."

"Suit yourself. I will enforce cuddles tonight, then, and you can't escape it."

Although she had said that with an amused smile, I found myself gulping in fear, imagining her slamming my head onto the ground then laying on top of me to force me to lay against her. I had no doubt she would do nothing of the sort, and probably would not insist to cuddle if I expressed I did not want to, but I couldn't get the image out of my head.

I sat in silence next to them for what felt like an hour. Ilma had adjusted her position and had her back and bottom supported by Belish's left arm, her front paws and chin resting on his shoulder as his right hand continued scratching her head, and her tail coiled around his torso. I wasn't sure if she was sleeping or just quietly enjoying the cuddling, but she remained perfectly motionless, her eyes closed, while Belish held his cheek against her damaged ear, squishing it against her head.

My heart ached as I watched them love each other.

All I could think of was Agnes. Alone in agony on her hospital bed. Possibly being harassed still by her overbearing hypocrite of a mother. Refusing to see a little sister she loved because it might expose her to her horrible parents. Knowing that she was not loved, and that her efforts towards being loved was what had led her to that situation.

I missed being held like Ilma was. The few minutes I had spent cuddling with Agnes on her hospital bed, despite the dire circumstances, were possibly the best of my entire life. I wanted to be there for her while she suffered and was lonely, but I was stuck here, alone, watching a human and a pokemon love each other more than my human and I did. Worse even, I actually did love that pokemon as well, but there was no way she loved me in return.

The vapoleon pushed her head away from her trainer to stare at me with worried eyes. She barked towards Belish, who gently deposited her back onto the sofa by his side, and scooted to me. I didn't resist when he sneaked his hands under my front legs, or when he lifted me to put me on his chest, or when he gathered my tails in his hand to form a bed for me to rest on, or when he pushed my ear against my head like he had done for his pokemon. He didn't say anything for a moment when I began whimpering in distress, pushing my head against his neck as I could, and started petting me, slowly moving his arm to cradle me.

"Are you worried for Agnes?" he asked. I shook my head. "Do you miss her?" I nodded. "We will visit her as soon as she is moved out of the ICU, okay? For now we need to give her the space she needs to recover."

He gave me a kiss on the head and held me close to him for a few minutes.

"Let's eat," he said. "I do have to go work this afternoon. Ilma, I'll leave you here to care for her, okay?"

The vapoleon barked with enthusiasm, then hopped off the sofa to rush to the kitchen. Belish carried me there, then put me down next to the fridge. He took a delicious-smelling pâté out of it, which he warmed in a microwave, before putting down two bowls by the central island. Ilma sat by the two bowls, staring intently at me, and her human went on to cook himself something.

"I can't eat this," I said. "We don't eat at noon."

Ilma let out a frustrated groan. "That's unhealthy. I'm surprised you were so good given how badly you were treated there. Once Agnes moves out of her parents' home, your life will change for the better. Now, eat, or I will force-feed you. You need to, especially after what you went through. Did you even eat anything while you were on your own?"

It took me a second to formulate an answer. Should I mention the eevee? Would that lead to potentially revealing Articuno's existence? Would it be better to be honest and say I had been helped, or pretend I had been alone as she seemed to think?

"I wasn't on my own," I eventually said. "I was rescued by a wild eevee I had befriended before. She gave me berries."

Ilma gave me an undecipherable frown. "I see. I commend your honesty. Still, berries are not enough to fill a stomach. Eat."

I reluctantly obeyed, forced to listen to my starving body, and ate along with her. Belish gave her bits of his meal, but I refused them - it would have been the first time I was gifted part of a human dish, and I wanted that to be from Agnes. They continued cuddling, with me laying on the sofa away from them, until it was time for Belish to leave.

"Come with me," the vapoleon said once her trainer had left. "Let's make good use of this short time we get together."

"What do you mean?"

"I believe you have lessons to catch up on, and I would like to see your improvement. I can tell you are more powerful than you were before leaving on the trip."

Could she feel my aura? Was that the reason why hers had become less overwhelming for me? Then, why had Topa not said anything when we met again? She would have felt it as well. Was she too happy to reunite with me to point it out?

"I had to fight to save Agnes," I whispered in a pout. "And I lost."

"I will ask about that another day, when Agnes has recovered. Come."

She led me into the corridor, passing right past the bathroom and bedroom, and down the stairs. The wooden floor of the house was replaced with crude stone steps, but the walls remained unchanged, save for lights having moved from the ceiling to torch-like appliances hanging upright on the walls and giving the stairs illumination too strong to even my eyes. The stairs spiralled to the left in a half-turn, then kept going down into a large open space under the house.

It was entirely occupied by a giant swimming pool.

"This is our private pool", Ilma said. She walked into the endless room, and lights switched themselves on. "It's as big as the house. I spend most of my free time here, and often with Belish."

"This is enormous."

She barked at me to follow, and I ran after her, walking around the edge of the pool. It looked similar to the Olympic pool the school had, but had none of the dark markings along its cerulean floor, and a small part of it was shallow by the entrance with a ladder to get in or out. The rest was surprisingly and frighteningly deep, far more than the pool I was used to.

"Why is it so deep?" I asked, my voice wavering.

"Do you know why vaporeon is the rarest natural evolved eevee in the wild? Because we are deep-water pokemon. Water stones are sometimes found in rivers or shores, and when an eevee comes into contact with one and is willing to evolve, they will follow the river to the sea, dive deep, and make their den there. They don't remain inland, even close to bodies of water. Sometimes, an eevee will request the assistance of a water pokemon to obtain a stone. In

exchange, the evolved vaporeon will protect the pokemon that found the evolution stone for them."

I remained silent for a few seconds, trying to sort through the questions that were rushing through my head.

"I have so many questions," I said. "Why would an eevee require the help of a water pokemon to find a stone?"

Ilma canted her head to the side. "Is it not evident? Water stones are found underwater. I personally believe they are formed deep in the sea, where even pokemon don't like going, and are torn from the ocean floor by the currents, then dragged places either by animals or the water."

That only gave me more questions, mostly about other evolution stones - fire ones in particular - but it was unlikely Ilma would be able to answer.

"Why would a pokemon want the protection of a vaporeon then?"

"We are predators in the sea," Ilma said, repressing a proud smile. "Among the strongest of all pokemon when it comes to fighting underwater, even. It is very advantageous for a pokemon, especially a weaker one, to have our protection."

Were eevee evolutions also predators inland, or was it only vaporeon reigning supreme in the water? Was eevee a dangerous predator, or more of a prey itself? What about vulpix?

Could I continue questioning her on that? Had she been wild herself, and therefore been a hunter? Would it be better to switch to a different topic? I hesitated for a few seconds, my eyes running around the pool as if to have the water make a decision for me, and decided to switch topics. Should Ilma start questioning me in return on the lives of wild vulpix, I would have been unable to answer.

"Do eevee... have evolutions they prefer? Do they choose?"

Ilma frowned for a second, then chuckled gently. "I was going to say of course, but you couldn't possibly know. Yes, we do. It depends on so many factors I wouldn't be able to make a list, but it's a mix of personal values, upbringing, and environment. Eevee often go on adventures in search for the right stone, and that's how we ended up being adopted by humans, even before the leaders left. Umbreon and espeon are the most commonly found in the wild since they do not require a stone to evolve."

"Would it be rude to ask what you wanted to evolve into? Or ask that to eevee in general?"

"No, absolutely not, although it tends to be a bit of a sour topic because very few eevee get to evolve as they wish, especially in the wild. As for me, I did want to be a vaporeon, and I am euphoric it came to be."

"How did you evolve? And why a vaporeon?"

Ilma chuckled with amusement. "I love how curious you are despite me being your superior. Oh, did I miss being treated..." Her eyes wandered off into the distance as her head drifted towards the floor. She looked me in the eye with an abrupt movement and emitted a quiet bark as if she were clearing her throat. "Anyway. Originally, I wasn't even supposed to be Belish's pokemon. I was already thirteen when he was born. His grandfather had bought me as an egg and given me to his father for his tenth birthday. Then, his father gave me to his then girlfriend as an engagement present. Then, his mother assigned me to him after his birth, and we stayed together since. Belish never once considered giving me away to someone else, and that is part of why I love him so much.

"I always found vaporeon to be the most majestic of all our evolutions. Over time, I came to admire Belish's humility and nobility, especially with how much his behaviour contrasted with his parents', so I thought he deserved no less than the most noble of pokemon and decided I would evolve into vaporeon."

"Do trainers let their eevee choose?"

"It really depends on the trainer. Oh, since you asked me how I evolved, would you like to know about Pico and Pride as well?"

I furiously nodded. I had already been making plans in my head to ask them if they chose to evolve into what they were, how, and why - Ilma could cover the first two parts and I could ask them why later.

"I'm not supposed to know this as I am meant to pretend I know nobody before lessons start, but Pico evolved as part of his enrolment in the academy," Ilma said. "Police sponsored his evolution stone because Derek placed among the top in the country for his high school graduation exams. So Pico was shown pictures of all our evolutions, and he chose flareon. Derek was given a fire stone and sent back home so that Pico could evolve without external stress."

"Is it stressful to evolve?"

Ilma's face briefly became grave as she nodded. "Extremely. The whole process takes only a couple seconds, but... your entire life changes abruptly. Even your body. It's like going to sleep, and then waking up as a completely different creature."

My heart faltered as she said that. Memories of my last night as a human came back to me - my computer, the dim light of my room, my hands, the comfort of my bed sheets, and then - pain. Death. The pokemon centre. The confusion.

"Are you okay?" Ilma asked.

I jolted back to reality and realised I had been staring into the void. Tears were falling from my eyes.

"Yes, I'm sorry. Please continue."

She frowned inquisitively in my direction, but didn't question me, and resumed. "Pride didn't have this chance, in a way. Sean chose for him, but as far as I know, he is happy with the choice."

"Did he also evolve when he enrolled?"

"No, Pride evolved before they entered police school. He simply told me about it. I've forgotten the story, so you should ask him the next time you see him."

"I absolutely will. What about the grumpy eevee? The one paired with Pico? Why has she not evolved yet?"

"Oh, her." Ilma let out a disappointed sigh. "She's... chosen not to evolve. She has expressed that she's ready, but she wants to evolve into a sylveon. She - do you know how sylveon came into existence?"

"No."

"Well, as I told you, eevee choose what they want to evolve into and pair with humans to find the right stone when it's required. Except sometimes, the eevee's love for their human is so great that they forego all their previous dreams and evolve into sylveon. It's the ultimate proof of love between a pokemon and a human. That's why I said 'natural evolutions' earlier, there can be no sylveon without humans."

"I thought the requirement for evolving into sylveon was knowing a fairy-type move."

Ilma burst into laughter, which caused me to blush in vexation.

"Topa told me that," I whispered. "I thought umbreon and espeon also required human contact."

"Because that is what humans think really happens. They spend lots of time teaching their eevee a fairy-type move, which helps them

bond, but it is in no way a requirement. Likewise, all that eevee needs to evolve into umbreon or espeon is experience, and human contact just helps them with that. That's why there are some of them that are wild, but they keep to themselves so much that humans think the only wild ones are those who left their households.

"Anyway. That eevee's name is Annie. She refuses to evolve into anything other than sylveon. She wants to prove that she really does love her trainer. She wants to convince herself she does. In reality, she can't bring herself to. I don't know why, and it is not my place to prod, but she does not love her trainer. Did you notice how grumpy and secluded she is? That is because, every day she does not evolve, she has her dream shattered before her eyes. Every day she remains an eevee is proof that she does not love her human as much as she wants to believe. She tells herself that if she loves nobody then all of her love will be for her human, and that is why she keeps every other pokemon away. She tells herself that maybe she isn't strong enough, and she trains extremely hard, and that is why she's the second strongest pokemon in your promotion. But no matter how much effort she makes, she can't bring herself to love her human, and she cannot evolve."

My ears lowered themselves as I looked away.

"As for me, I evolved when I entered the military. Belish filed a request to his superior before being sent to boot camp. He knew I wanted to be a vapoleon, and they sent him a water stone a few months before we joined the military. It was advantageous for them, since they already knew what sort of training he and I would have. Me being an eevee still meant they would have to either force me to evolve into something, or train us in a bit of everything, meaning we would have been less proficient, therefore less effective."

"How did he know?"

"I told him. One day while we were bathing, I put water in my mouth and spat it. He understood."

I wanted to reply something, but lowered my head in thought. Would I ever feel ready to evolve? Was that something I would eventually want?

"Let's get going," Ilma said. "I do have something important to talk to you about, but we can do so while taking a break."

I let out a weary sigh as I stepped into the water. It was surprisingly warm to the touch, more so than the pool at the school - almost uncomfortably hot. Ilma dove into the water next to me, then swam with astonishing speed to the bottom and back up.

"All right. Let's pick up where we left off."

She was as merciless as she had been in class, but also just as patient, guiding me through the exercises she had the rest of the class do as I was out of commission because of the houndour's attack. I didn't last much longer than the first time I tried swimming, but Ilma congratulated me on my improvement nonetheless, and opted to stay in the water as I laid by the pool, drying myself with a short flame.

"Your aura changed," she said. "I can feel it. It has grown significantly more powerful."

"It's because I fought to save Agnes," I said, repeating my earlier reply. "Isn't that the way one grows their power? By pushing one's limits?"

Ilma smiled wholeheartedly. "I see you still learn quickly. How has she been to you?"

Learn? Articuno had been the one to tell me how to grow my power. Did Ilma assume that I had learnt it from Agnes? Was she asking me how my trainer had been treating me before the trip?

Was she referring to the legendary bird? Did she know? Had she figured it out because my power had changed?

I blinked a few times, my heart racing, then feigned a confused frown. "She who?"

"Articuno, of course."

I couldn't bring myself to speak for a few seconds, my mind racing as I tried to find a way to answer. I had not mentioned Articuno to anyone as she had told me, so how did Ilma know? Had something in my aura changed so much that she had detected it came from another pokemon? Had she known the leaders were real this whole time and simply pretended that they were just a legend? Did other pokemon know without ever meeting any of the legendaries?

"You don't have to pretend you don't know," she insisted. "I know you went to the White Hat to meet with her. I know she asked you to join the zealots."

"How?" I finally asked.

Ilma chuckled gently. "How do you think I became so powerful? I am one of her zealots."

Chapter 47

I stared at her in bewilderment. I couldn't bring myself to say anything - all of my attempts came out as jumbled messes of random vocalisations as words competed to escape my mouth faster than my brain could join them together. Her abrupt revelation had given me so many questions I felt like I was being overwhelmed into crying.

"Has she not told you?"

"She... said I had already befriended a zealot, but I thought she referred to the eevee."

"Does that mean you do not think of me as your friend?"

My answer escaped me in a whisper before I could even consider the question. "I don't know."

To my surprise, Ilma chuckled with amusement, floating on her back as her chest bobbed up and down in a fast rhythm. She dove into the water, then surfaced a few seconds after.

"Let's continue," she said. "I will tell you my story if you do well."

I opened my mouth to protest, but I wasn't sure what to say that wouldn't sound like I was just a whiny kid. I wanted to hear her story immediately. I had too many questions.

"Come on," she insisted. "If I tell you the story now, you will end up being overwhelmed. Given your reaction, I surmise you did not expect me to be a zealot, so give yourself time to come to terms with the idea before you learn more."

"Okay, fine," I pouted. "Let's continue. And then you tell me everything."

"If you do well," Ilma said with a malicious grin. "And I won't give you any mercy."

"Bring it on."

I gave her a resolute glare and jumped into the water, purposely splashing her, and she giggled as she dove again. It didn't matter what she would bring to me - I was determined to impress her and hear her story.

I laid exhausted by the pool, still soaked in water, while Ilma swam in circles next to me.

"I am impressed," she said. "You outdid yourself. You really did want to hear my story, didn't you?"

"It's not fair you put a condition on it," I wheezed.

"Why not? Nothing in life is free. Anyway, a promise is a promise, but before I tell you, I want to hear yours. I know you were rescued by an eevee, but what happened after that?"

"She took me to her den. We rested a little, ate a few berries, and talked about the forest. There-"

"Later," she interrupted me. "When Agnes testifies, I will ask you for your side of the story. Keep it somewhere in your mind for now."

I wasn't sure why she was so intent on not letting me tell her anything. Was it not better to have me talk while the memories were still fresh? Were they so fresh there was a risk of hurting me if I reminisced too early? Was she simply looking out for me?

"I complained that I wasn't strong enough to protect Agnes," I said, my voice turning into whimpers. "So she mentioned she could take me to her training grounds. She led me to the snow and into a cavern where I met Articuno. Now that I think about it, that was probably a ruse to get me to follow her there."

"Did you have to go through a weird cave with no light whatsoever? That gave into a clearing like in the middle of the forest?"

"Yes. It was covered in ice and Articuno had a nest in its centre."

Ilma nodded as if to agree with me. "So she hasn't moved after all these years. What happened next?"

"I... freaked out for a bit. She had me sleep on her nest, and then we talked. About-"

I couldn't continue. Ilma didn't know I was human, and Articuno had told me to keep it secret.

"About what?"

"About what is happening in the forest, about me, about Agnes. Then she asked me to join her zealots, I accepted, and she trained me."

Ilma nodded in approval. "Welcome to the zealots, then. Did her training consist in knocking you out repeatedly while feeding you berries to keep you somewhat conscious?"

"Yes. It was horrible."

"But it worked."

I held a flame over myself to dry my fur. "Are you not surprised I accepted?"

"A little, but at the same time, no. I didn't think you would have the confidence to accept, but serving a pokemon seems to me like something you would be happy to do."

I interrupted myself to glare at her. "What do you mean?"

Ilma blinked in return. "You've always seemed to me like you were lost. Like you felt like you didn't belong anywhere. From the first time

we met until now. You've always been clinging to someone - Topa at first, then Pico, then that eevee, and now me. I have the feeling you need someone to guide you because you wouldn't know what to do with yourself otherwise. It's probably because you were wild and were taken away from your family. Before you complain, there's nothing wrong with that at all - it is expected, if anything, since you are still so young. It's just very remarkable in you, because at the same time, you also try to prove that you're very capable and get upset whenever you fail or have to rely on others. You are so dependent yet so proud. So I thought that taking orders from Articuno herself would be perfect for you - it gives you someone to fall back onto when you need to, and at the same time, you have the pride of having been chosen and the freedom to do what you think is right."

I lowered my head, my face becoming warm from embarrassment.

"So," she continued, "I am proud of you for going out of your comfort zone and accepting."

"If I'm so dependent and weak, why are you not surprised she asked me?"

"Who said you were weak? And it is not in my position to question the decisions of a goddess. She knows things I do not, and if she believes you can serve her well, then so do I."

I blinked at her several times, shocked by the phlegm with which she had announced her faith in Articuno - a faith that was eerily similar to how religious people felt. The bird had not been wrong in saying that she was essentially a goddess - it was evident that she was treated as such.

"She said I could talk to her," I whispered.

"Yes. You just think about her and talk to yourself. You have to direct your thoughts towards her, though, but it is no different from directing your thoughts towards your powers. We can try if you want."

"No, it's okay. I... have you ever done it?"

Ilma nodded. "I give reports on what is happening among humans. I gave a report when you were found alive."

"Me? Why me?"

"You are the only survivor of the attacks so far. I thought it would be worth mentioning. It turns out it was, because she ordered me to keep an eye on you and make sure you were safe."

"Has she ever replied?"

Ilma let out a disappointed sigh. "Too few times. I wish she would speak to me more, but it comforts me to know she is listening. I just haven't said anything worth a conversation. I don't really ask her questions, I just report on what is happening. I assume she wants you to do the same?"

I nodded. Before I could open my mouth, Ilma extracted herself from the water, and walked up to me with a smile. She was already completely dry as if her fur had never been submerged.

"Let's go rest in the living room," she said. "There probably is quite some time before Belish returns. Let's get some snacks and I will tell you my story since you told me yours."

"I don't think I should eat," I said. "It's going to-"

Ilma's angry glare silenced me. I followed her as she began walking, gulping silently, understanding there would be no refusing any snacks for me. She would probably just force them down my gullet if I tried insisting.

She inspected my body to make sure I was fully dry before asking me to jump and lay on the sofa while she went to the kitchen to fetch snacks. She came back with a large bag of what looked and smelled like dry food.

"You can only eat a few," she said, depositing it on the floor. "Don't overdo it or you won't have any appetite for dinner."

She proceeded to paw at the bag to try to pry it open. Watching her struggle with it, canting her head to the side and sometimes groaning in frustration, made me giggle with innocence - I had almost forgotten that pokemon were animals, and she reminded me that she was not just an extremely powerful water pokemon, but also simply a cat.

I scooted over to the side of the sofa and threw myself back in the forest, camping with Agnes. My vision turned blue, and I jolted my modified energy onto the bag, opening it with ease.

Ilma jolted in response, hopping backwards, and snapped her head towards me.

"Was that you?" she asked. She frowned, then groaned. "Of course it is. I can see your eyes."

"Can you not see the energy?"

"Did Pride not tell you? Pokemon and humans can't see the telekinetic halo. Only pokemon capable of psychic powers can. Can you pick up treats and bring them to yourself?"

"I don't control my powers that well yet," I whispered, making my vision return back to normal. "I can only push things for now."

"Remarkable progress still. Either Pride is a great teacher or you learn incredibly fast. Given what I've seen of you, I bet on the latter."

She picked up a few treats and jumped onto the sofa, dropping some before me and the rest before herself. She ate them quickly, but I took the time to chew and savour them.

"Do you remember what I said about the war?" she asked.

"Vaguely. I remember..." my eyes leered over her wounded side and the countless flashes of pink flesh that poked through her beautiful fur. "What happened to you."

Ilma's eyes transiently wavered in distress, and she gave me a grave nod. "After my year of surgeries and once I was cleared to leave the pokemon centre, I was given back to Belish. We still lived in military housings back then. I couldn't do much of my days, I was still in pain and struggling to move. I would spend my time in his bathtub and he would spend his next to me. He even turned his bathroom into an impromptu office so that he could care for other wounded soldiers without having to leave my side.

"We attended the decoration ceremony because our general pretty much forced us to, but Belish was unhappy I was forced to exert myself. That was when he was offered his position here. He accepted without waiting, since he knew I would have agreed anyway, and used his decoration rewards to have this house built. While it was being built, we travelled here and visited the nearby forest. There is a beautiful lake up in the mountains, not far from the White Hat."

"I know," I interrupted with excitement. "It belongs to Agnes's family. It's where we went."

"It does? I had no idea. I suppose that means Belish knew the Trokair family before Agnes got in police school."

I frowned. "I guess. Say, I'm curious, but why do you call your trainer by his last name? What even is his first name?"

Ilma stole one of my treats and gulped it before I could react, causing me to protest loudly and her to giggle, then canted her head to the side.

"You don't know it?" I shook my head. "Ah, I suppose you wouldn't. His first name is David. As for" - she interrupted herself with a quiet gasp, then sighed - "it's just a habit. I've changed hands so many

times within his family that I stopped bothering trying to call my trainers by their first names. They're all Belish to me. It makes it easier and it helped me not get too attached."

"But you're attached to Doctor Belish now, right? Why not -"

"Habit," she interrupted me. "How I call him doesn't matter anyway, does it? He does not speak our language. I have other ways to show him that I love him. It's just a name."

So her view of names was opposite to Pride's - it seemed that names mattered a lot to him given that our first conversation had been about our names, but Ilma evidently didn't care.

She stared at me in silence for a second. "Shall I continue?"

"Yes, please. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry. I have to admit, the water in that lake is remarkable. I spent a lot of time in it, but Belish mostly camped and made sure I was doing well. One evening, we were looking at the White Hat, Belish telling me about the eternal snow, and I realised something. Whatever pokemon was in there, they certainly had the power to help me."

"Help you?"

Ilma nodded, her ears and tail dropping, and looked away. "I was living in shame. When my squad's formation broke, it was my duty to cover our retreat, and I failed. Our psychic died horribly because of me. The others only survived because I nearly didn't. I struggled with living with my failure at the time."

I opened my mouth to say something, but couldn't find words to express how I felt - if I even knew how I felt. I would have never imagined that Ilma lived with shame over what she wrongly perceived as a shortcoming. She had such a strong presence and so much confidence that I imagined nothing could ever shake her.

She had survivor's guilt.

"So I told Belish I wanted to stay at the lake. It was difficult to convince him to let me. He made me the promise that he would return to pick me up when the house was finished and we could move into it. He left that night, and I think it was the last time I saw him cry - the first time being after I was hit by the mortar. I went into the snow the day after. I thought I wandered aimlessly, but I found that cavern you went through, and that's how I met Articuno. She had been guiding me to her."

"Do you know why?"

"She never explained it to me. She said she was expecting me when I met her, and that she would help me gain power if I explained to her why I had come to seek it. I said that I was too weak to protect anyone and needed to get stronger."

My eyes widened as I realised that she and I had both sought power for the exact same reason - probably why Articuno had been interested in making me a zealot, if that was the reason Ilma had become one.

"I explained to her what had happened in the war and that I had come to either become strong enough to protect anyone I set my eyes on, or die trying."

"Wait. Die trying?"

"I asked her to kill me if she thought I couldn't be trained."

I spent a few seconds staring at her, incredulous.

"Naturally, she declined, and accepted to train me if I became a zealot. It was impossible at first because of my injuries, so she summoned Suicune -"

"You met Suicune?" I shouted.

Her cold glare caused a terrified shiver to cross my spine. I huddled up on myself, pushing what was left of my treats towards her.

"Suicune finished my healing so that I could train with Articuno," she said, happily eating my peace offering, "and she spent time training me herself. She had a vastly different approach from Articuno's. Instead of repeatedly knocking me out to force my powers to grow, she had me push my own limits by going up against her in a water fight."

"You were trained by two of the leaders? Just... how strong are you now?"

"I wouldn't know, but my water could probably snap a man in half."

My eyes ran over her beautifully muscled body. I remembered the way her aura felt the first time I had met her - raw, overwhelming power. It felt so much less overwhelming now, and yet, she seemed to be powerful beyond most other pokemon. Just how strong had I become myself?

"I didn't know Suicune could heal."

Ilma chuckled. "Water is not the only thing she can purify. I think, of all the leaders, Suicune is the most mysterious one. As far as I know, she is the only one capable of healing others instead of only herself. She travels with the wind and nobody ever knows where exactly she is and when, even other leaders. She just appears somewhere to do something that confuses everyone, then returns to the winds to carry on whatever quest it is she pursues. She hardly speaks while Articuno is rather verbose. I feel like she answers to a higher authority than the other leaders."

"A higher authority? You mean Mew himself?"

"I don't know. I think the leaders obey Mew, but not Suicune." Ilma shrugged, covering my muzzle with her tail as I was about to answer. "I spent about three months with them. Suicune didn't show up every

day, but she would check on me regularly and help me train when she was around. Then, one day, Articuno told me that my trainer was returning to the forest, and I waited at the lake for him. I was fully recovered then, and we moved into this house and took the job at the police academy."

I didn't dare say anything, silently staring at her waiting for her story to finish.

"Now you know my story," she said. "Saying it out loud makes me wonder what was so special about you that Articuno wanted you to be a zealot."

"I..." I hesitated. "You and I gave Articuno the same answer. She asked me why I wanted to be stronger too. Well, not exactly, but I did mention I had been too weak to protect someone, so she trained me, although it only lasted one afternoon."

"But why did she summon you? The eevee that rescued you was a zealot, I gathered that much, but she couldn't possibly have decided to make you meet Articuno on her own. It had to be an order."

My eyes lowered themselves as I dug into my memory for my encounter with the legendary bird. "I remember Articuno saying she had sent the eevee to keep an eye on me, so I suppose you're right. She did want to see me, at least she said that much."

"Why?" Ilma asked. "I am not saying you don't deserve it, but Articuno wanted to see me because I sought power. Was it the same for you?"

"No. She..." I hesitated again. "She wanted to learn about humans."

The vaporeon frowned, her gaze turning to an accusative focus. "Why ask you? You've only been with humans for... however long. You've been in police school for less than a month."

My heart had begun racing. As I looked around the room in a conflict with myself, my thoughts redirected themselves to Articuno in search for assistance, and I jolted visibly when her perfect crystalline voice resonated in my head to answer my question.

"What's wrong?" Ilma asked.

"Well... she asked me because I know them well. I am a vulpix now, but I used to be human."

Chapter 48

Ilma leered at me with wide pupils, incredulous, as I shivered in fear in front of her. She canted her head to the side then closed her eyes for a few seconds.

"Damn," she said. "I did not see that coming."

"Did you just ask Articuno if it was true?"

Ilma giggled gently. "Guilty as charged."

She stood on the sofa, towering over me. For a few moments, she simply stared me down, her eyes creeping over my body as if to analyse it. Thoughts raced in my head - was she going to attack me? Tell me to get out? Call me a liar?

"So you used to be human," she finally said. "How did you become a pokemon?"

"I don't know. I just went to bed, then woke up in another world and another body."

"Another world? You mean you're not even from here?"

I nodded with a strong blush, and her formerly focused look turned to confusion.

"That... is a mystery. Interesting, certainly, but also dangerous. I have to commend you on how well you fit in. I would have never guessed."

"Topa helped me," I whispered. "She knows and has been teaching me about this world, and how to... be a pokemon."

"I see. That makes her special, in that case, for knowing this. I do think, however, that you should not tell any more pokemon, and

certainly not any humans. This needs to be kept secret as much as we can. I am grateful for the trust you've shown by telling me this."

"Articuno said the same thing. She said that Moltres wanted to destroy me before I became a problem."

Ilma giggled. "Not a surprise. Moltres is a little hot-headed, from what I have heard. He seems to always be of rather extreme opinions, and Articuno sometimes has trouble keeping him in check." Her laughter was cut short as she turned her head to me with a stern look. "So the leaders know about you, and they discussed your case. I have to admit, I feel envious. I wish they knew about my existence."

"Maybe they do? You're a zealot."

"No. Articuno mentioned that she doesn't know if the other leaders even have zealots. They don't seem to communicate very often."

She sat again, then hopped off the sofa to return the bag to the kitchen. When she returned, she stood above me for a moment, but turned around and laid against a pillow away from me.

"So, how are you enjoying being a pokemon?"

The question caught me by surprise, and I spent a few seconds to mull it over, staring down at my paws in silence.

"I got used to it," I finally said.

Ilma raised an eyebrow, staring at me with an expectant look on her face. I gave her a shrug after a moment of silence.

"What a remarkable answer," she said. "Yet you are so young, and were so emotional just a month ago. You have grown so much in such a short time. I am impressed. You must have been a brilliant human."

"Not particularly. I was a university student, but I was probably below average when it comes to my class."

"University students who are below average are considered vastly above average the population here," Ilma said.

"I guess it would be the same in my former world. I just don't like saying I'm intelligent. I don't know if I am, but if I were, I would not brag about it."

"How humble. As far as vulpix go, though, you might just be one of the most intelligent in all of history. Vulpix is normally less intelligent than humans. I wonder if your intelligence will grow once you evolve, then you would be one of the most gifted ninetales as well."

"Why? Is ninetales more intelligent than humans?"

Ilma nodded with a large smile. I had no time to reflect on it, however, as she continued talking.

"That does bring a question," she said. "Do you plan to evolve?"

"I think it's too soon for me to make that choice," I replied with speed that surprised even myself. "I haven't thought it through."

"Agnes will want you to evolve eventually."

"I know. All I can say is that I am not ready."

Ilma nodded with approval. "How very mature. I really admire the progress you've made with your mindset in a mere month."

I opened my mouth to say something, my ears laying themselves on my head in anger, but didn't speak any words. Ilma was right - my mindset had significantly changed since I had first met her, and with the perspective I had gained, I felt like I had a clearer view of my life in general, as well as my future.

Yet, the idea of losing Agnes still made my heart turn, and I had no idea what I could ever do if she died. Or when - I would certainly outlive her.

"Say, Ilma, I have a potentially upsetting question."

"Sure, ask."

"You said that vaporeon lives a few hundred years. What will you do when Doctor Belish dies? What do pokemon in general do when their trainers die?"

She remained silent for a second, her eyes and ears lowering themselves. "There aren't that many pokemon who can outlive humans. Most of us have lifespans similar to theirs. For those unfortunate enough to have to go through that, it depends. The ones most attached to their humans will either let themselves die with them, or assign themselves to the human's children."

I nodded. I had heard stories of pets doing this in my world - it wasn't unthinkable that pokemon, who were more intelligent than animals, would do the same. At the same time, I would have expected that to cause pokemon not to simply waste away their lives - maybe that was why they assigned themselves to their trainers' children.

"The ones who are not attached to their humans' families leave their households and return to the wild. It is rare, but possible, and in general, these pokemon are not very accepted by the others and are ostracised. I surmise they live rather unhappy lives until they die of old age or in a fight."

My thoughts redirected themselves to the zealot eevee, cast aside due to the colour of her fur. When Agnes died, if she had no children, could I join her at the lake? Would that improve either of our lives?

"Can zealots go live with Articuno?" I asked. "Even if they become mostly useless to her?"

"Yes, of course. I don't know of any who did that, but it is very much possible. I think she assigns them a patch of land, and they can continue reporting that way until they die."

"Will you do that?"

She slowly shook her head, and let out a sorrowful sigh. "I get no such choice. I am not a free pokemon, I am military property. When Belish dies, I will be reassigned to another officer. That is what happened to Dante, by the way. So many of his owners have died now, but at least he is nearing the end of his life and the commissioner should be his last human."

"Who's Dante?"

"The director's absol. He is about 250 years old now. I'm not sure what his exact age is since we never talked about it."

I nodded slowly, my eyes lowering themselves with a sad frown. Was that the reason why he was so silent? Was he unhappy with his new assignment? Did the director know?

"Given my decorations and record, I will probably be given to a high-ranking officer," Ilma continued. "Then another one when that one dies. Rinse and repeat until the end of my life. You, on the other hand, are the property of an individual, which means you are free to do what you want once that individual dies. If you decide to look after Agnes's children, they will have paperwork to do to adopt you as their pokemon."

My heart dropped. For a second, I considered walking to her to cuddle in a vain effort to cheer her up, but her neutral face told me she didn't seem bothered by the prospect of being property and having no freedom.

"Can't you just leave after Doctor Belish dies?" I asked.

"I would be branded a deserter," she replied with another sigh. "Shamed and stripped of my achievements."

"Is that more important than your freedom?"

"Yes."

Her cold answer threw me off, and I didn't dare continue the conversation.

Nothing more was said after that about Articuno, the zealots, or either of us. We continued playing games in the water until our ears caught the familiar jingle - then rattling - of keys and we rushed out to meet with Belish as he returned from work. He spared some time to dry me with a towel, and we had a silent meal as he watched television, Ilma cuddling with him as I kept myself away from them, laying against the arm of the sofa.

The media had not yet heard of the attack Agnes and I had been victims of, but were trying to assign blame to police for the cordon surrounding the Glossy Hills and the immense losses the tourism industry was facing because of them, while at the same time attacking them on their failure to catch the serial killer or make any known progress on it.

I turned to Ilma, who laid on her trainer's lap as he ate. "What about the school? Do they know what happened to Agnes?"

"As far as they are concerned, she was wounded during an exercise," Ilma said. "They were not given the specifics of it, nor will they. Its nature or purpose are also kept secret."

"How do you justify that?"

Ilma shrugged. "It was an activity intended for her due to her exceptional performance in physical tests. They don't need to know more."

"What about Derek and Pico?"

The vaporeon snapped her eyes to me. "What about them? They're not Agnes's family. Derek is not in a relationship with her. He is not entitled to knowing more than the others, even if they're friends. If

Agnes wants him to know more, she can have him visit her. I have no doubt she will once she is taken out of the ICU, but for now, he knows nothing."

"Why has he not visited her yet?"

"Her location is kept secret by request of the commissioner."

I nodded with a whimper. That was a fair stance, albeit harsh. It was Agnes's choice whether or not to let Derek know how bad she really was, and for the time being, she hadn't even begun recovering and was not able to make the decision.

I had no heart to continue chatting or practising with Ilma afterwards. She and Belish went out in the garden to play and left me alone in the living room moping. They didn't stay out long and went to bed quite early as the sun set, dragging me into Belish's bedroom with them - and, as promised, Ilma forced me to cuddle with her until I fell asleep.

It took well over a week for Agnes to be moved out of the ICU.

During that time, Ilma trained me mercilessly and tirelessly, forcing me to swim for hours without break in the morning, then having me perform various battling and fighting exercises she had learnt from the military in the afternoon until Belish came back. My only break was when her trainer was home, which we generally spent eating then resting on the couch until he had to leave.

I adamantly refused to cuddle with Belish and would only cuddle with Ilma when she forced me to at night. The only affection I allowed myself to get was when I visited Agnes in the hospital and she held me against her, breathing with decreasing difficulty over the days. Her family had not returned after her rude rejection the first day, and I had not had a chance to see Topa again, or even hear from her. Every day when I turned the corner to go to Agnes's room, I felt a pinch in my heart from not seeing the ninetales sitting in the corridor

waiting, and every day she was not there to meet with me, the pain got a little stronger.

Finally, on Thursday, August second - almost two weeks after the deadly trip - Belish received a call saying that Agnes had been transferred to a personal room. Preparations had been made for me to visit her in the afternoon, and the commissioner and himself would visit the following Saturday to gather her testimonial - and mine - about the attack.

My body wavered in anticipation as a police car took me from Belish's house to the hospital before the doctor left for work. Besides the policeman who drove, I was alone - Ilma had opted to let me have this reunion with Agnes in private and went to the school with her trainer. A nurse accompanied me to the upper floors of the hospital, quite far from the ER and the ICU, and struggled to keep up with my hasty steps.

She stopped before a door undistinguishable from the others to me, and knocked.

"Miss Trokair, your pokemon is here."

"Let her in."

Her voice was completely different from the one I had heard the first time I had seen her after she woke up. Although still somewhat raspy, it was more lively and a lot more confident, resonating in my ears in a smooth flow instead of the bursts of laboured breaths she used to speak with.

The room Agnes was in was similar to the one I had been in after returning home, but larger, and far larger than the ICU room she had been stuck in. There were fewer machines and less equipment, but Agnes still laid on the same bed, a nasal cannula going into her nostrils, and several IV lines into her arm and hand. She weakly moved her head to the door when it opened, and an angelic smile brightened her exhausted face when she saw me.

"Come here," she said.

I didn't rush. I knew she was severely wounded and still in pain. Although I did run up to her bed, I made sure to jump on it next to her feet, then carefully walked towards her chest until she wrapped an arm around me and kissed the top of my head. The nurse took the opportunity to check on Agnes's vitals, then left us together in peace, closing the door behind her.

"I'm doing okay," my human said once we were alone. "They removed the drain yesterday. I can breathe on my own now, although they're still giving me oxygen for safety. And, look."

She pushed her sheet aside to show me the gigantic bandage that covered her belly - the same that I remembered on myself. She had lost a horrifying amount of weight, and there was not much meat on her bones anymore.

I lowered my head towards it, sniffing around her lower stomach where I knew her wound had been. The smell of blood was gone, replaced with unpleasant artificial smells that caused me to sneeze, probably from the medicine that had been applied to clean around the wound. Agnes pulled me up with an amused giggle and covered herself again.

"How are Ilma and Doctor Belish treating you?" she asked. I barked with joyful enthusiasm. "That's good. We'll be together again soon, okay? I think the hospital might keep me for a while more. They tried to make me stand yesterday, but I nearly passed out when I tried to sit." She chuckled again, as if amused by the memory. "It's going to take me a long time to recover from this, that much is certain, but I'll be okay. And when I can return to the force we can catch these bastards once and for all."

I emitted a quiet whimper and poked her cheek once with my muzzle before nesting against her.

"Don't worry, I'm not exerting myself until I have permission to from the doctors. They will want me to, anyway. My muscles will atrophy otherwise and we can't have that."

She smiled to me, and my heart broke.

How could she be in such good spirits after what happened to her? She had nearly died - again - and been separated from me for a week. Despite visiting her, her parents had shown that they still had no respect for her, to the point where she had to send me away for my own safety. She wasn't sure she would even properly recover.

It was the same thing as her accident in her childhood. Alone and rejected in a hospital, she still managed to smile and find hope for the future. Wounded and broken, she had the strength not to give up.

But she wasn't alone this time. She wasn't rejected.

She had me.

I adjusted my position so that my head rested on her chest and let out a deep sigh. She kissed my ear, causing it to flick away, and gently rubbed the side of my body.

"You and I are the same now, aren't we?" she asked. "Survivors of the same horrible wound. And this time, you were the one who saved my life." She hugged me tighter and sniffed loudly. "Thank you."

There was a knock at the door. Before Agnes could reply, a nurse came in, carrying a large egg in her hands. My human immediately groaned with disgust.

"I'm sorry," the nurse said. "You know it's important for your recovery. We'll give you another meal tonight to see if you are able to swallow now. Do you mind if I check your bandage?"

"It's okay." Agnes seized the egg from the nurse. "Go ahead. Can I give some to Ruby?"

"A bite or two won't hurt."

Agnes separated a part of the chansey egg as the nurse lifted her sheets to check her bandage. The texture was similar to a marshmallow, but smelled like a delicious fried egg. I carefully picked the small part she gave me from her hand, my tails wagging as I ate it with haste - while Agnes winced and groaned as she forced herself to eat the rest. The nurse gently swatted my muzzle away when I tried to sneak a bite in.

"Don't eat it," she said. "It's important for her. We give her chansey eggs because they're the only food we know of that can be eaten even when the person is unable to swallow water, and they accelerate the healing process for most people." She covered Agnes with her bed sheets again. "Bandage looks good. Oh, the hospital called your family and they will be visiting you soon. Should I tell them you don't want to see them?"

"No," Agnes replied after a delay. "I'll see them. Tell them to bring Topa, I miss her, and I'm sure Ruby does as well."

I furiously nodded as the nurse withdrew, then turned worried eyes to my trainer.

"Don't worry," she said. "I can take it. I think it's time I gave my parents a piece of my mind, and I'm worried about Melissa."

Despite her confident voice, the arm that held me against her tensed up.

Agnes was shaking when another knock came from the door, and the nurse announced that her family was here to visit her. She allowed them with a trembling voice, still tightly holding me against her.

Melissa rushed in first. She ran to Agnes, crying her name, and threw herself into the arms of her sister, who held her as she could with only one arm and whispered soothing words in an attempt to quiet her loud wailing. Her parents followed soon after, standing by the bed at a respectful distance, so that Melissa had the time she needed to cry in Agnes's arms.

Topa walked in last.

I gave a hint of escaping my human's arms to go to her, but Agnes's hold tightened as soon as she felt me moving. I understood that she needed me to stay on her for comfort during the coming conversation, and that Agnes was well aware there would be nothing pleasant about it. As I peeked at her, Topa gave me a grave nod, as if to say she understood why I had not moved from my position, and instead walked to my side of the bed to stand on her hind legs and exchange a few licks with me. We said nothing - we could have our conversation once the humans had had theirs.

When Melissa removed herself from Agnes's arms, still crying, she ran to her father, who held her against his leg with a protective hand upon her shoulders. Her mother repressed a sob, then hurried towards her wounded daughter, leaning forward for a hug.

Agnes pushed her away.

"Why?" her mother asked.

"I am not a fool," Agnes said in a growl. "Your theatrics and fake tears won't work on me."

"What are you saying?"

"I know what you tried to do to Ruby when she returned home."

There was a silence. Agnes gave her father a subtle nod, and he gave me a subtle smile.

"I didn't do anything!" her mother protested.

"Because Father stopped you. I want nothing to do with someone who attacks my pokemon and blames her for the consequences of my own decisions."

"You can't mean that."

Agnes groaned with difficulty as she tried to sit up, then whimpered in pain and laid back down. Her mother raised her arms towards her, but I stood over my trainer, growling protectively, and she withdrew.

"I know very well how you feel towards me," Agnes continued, holding her belly with her free hand. "Why you didn't visit me when I was a kid. Why you won't let me form a real relationship with Ruby."

"You don't know what you're saying."

"I do. I will call the flat I'm holding tomorrow and buy it. Go ahead and disown me, since your hatred for Ruby is more important to you than your pretend love for me. I'm moving out."

Melissa moved towards us, but her father held her back. Silent as a tomb, Madam stared at her daughter with bewildered eyes, and with tears.

"You're overreacting because you're in pain," she said, stepping forward again.

"Yes!" Agnes shouted.

The effort caused her to cough violently, trembling and seizing on her bed. She coughed so hard that she retched several times and caused her nasal cannula to be shot out of her nose. I stood and laid my head on her chest as I could, and she held me with both hands while taking deep breaths to regain control of her breathing.

"Yes," she repeated, putting the tubes back into her nostrils. "I am. I've been in pain almost my whole life. I've been in pain since the day

you refused to visit me in the hospital when my hair was being held on my skull by sutures. Do you know what it feels like to learn that your parents consider their jobs more important than your life? That they don't love you?"

Melissa resumed crying at that moment, and her father's hold did nothing to soothe it. He peered at her with sorry eyes, then took a hesitant step towards Agnes, still holding his weeping daughter.

"Agnes -" he said.

"Shut up," she interrupted. "You are hardly better." She turned back to her mother, fuming. "You're blaming Ruby for what happened to me, but you're wrong. We needed this trip to mend our relationship, that's true, but our relationship needed mending because we never had a chance to grow into one at home. Because you made those stupid rules that said I wasn't allowed to love my pokemon because you were hurt from loving yours."

Agnes's mother's mouth wavered, and she began crying silently. It didn't stop her daughter's angry glare, and she simply held me tighter even, almost to the point of hurting me. I peered at her with a worried stare.

She too was crying.

"I nearly died because you two are incapable of love. You want to blame Ruby for it? Without her, I would be dead. She was the one who saved my life. She is the reason why I'm in the hospital recovering instead of in the morgue waiting to be identified. She means more to me than you two ever will."

Agnes sniffed loudly and carefully slid a hand under my chest to lift me and put me on hers.

"Thank you for trying to learn from your past mistakes and having the hypocrisy to visit me now," she said. "But I don't need it. Melissa

is the one I wanted to see, not you. Now, get out. I don't want to see you ever again. I don't want you in my life."

Sir finally let go of Melissa and walked towards Agnes, trying to take her hand - which she refused to give.

"Please," he said. "You don't need to be this drastic. We'll let you move out if that's what you want."

"You'll let me move out but you won't let me love my pokemon. You won't let Melissa love hers. You brought this upon me and it's time I recognise it. I will not change my mind. Get out."

"What about me?" Melissa whined. "Are you removing me from your life too?"

"No," Agnes said. "I will stay in contact with you. You can visit me in my apartment when I'm better."

Melissa limped towards her sister to hug her again. Agnes held her with both hands, and glared at her parents with a furious frown.

"Out," she said.

Sir gave Agnes a grave nod and gently took his wife's hand, who was still crying, to lead her towards the door. Before leaving, he turned around, tears in his eye, and glanced at his daughter with a smile.

"If that is your decision," he said, "then I will respect it, and I will ensure that your mother does as well. But if you ever change your mind or decide to give us a second chance, you know how to reach me. I just want you to know that I am proud of you, for everything you've done for your pokemon, for the strength you have, and for your achievements. I am proud that you found something worth your life, even if that isn't us. I am proud of you and, even if I never showed you, I love you."

He turned around and left as Agnes broke into tears.

Chapter 49

"Promise me you will take care of Topa," Agnes said. "I give you permission to ignore Mother's rules. You shouldn't be forbidden from loving your pokemon."

She and Melissa had spent a few minutes talking, mostly about what life would be like for them now that Agnes was moving out. My human had been embracing her little sister the whole time, and I had jumped down to cuddle with Topa, who had not stopped grooming me. We hadn't had a chance to talk yet, not wanting to make noise while the two siblings were having a moment, and figuring we could another time.

I had dearly missed Topa's embrace, more so than I had missed Agnes's - her smell, the softness of her fur, the fluff of her tails. Her presence in general. The way she had immediately wrapped herself around me and spent a few seconds just sniffing at me indicated she too had missed me and my smell - unless she was simply smelling what odours I had picked up from Belish's house - and her large smile and wagging tails showed she was happy to finally see me again - as did mine.

"I promise," Melissa said. "Agnes, I don't want you to leave. You're angry with Mom and Dad but they will get better."

"No, they won't. I can't explain why to you yet, you'll have to grow up first. There are things - bad things - that you will find out and I don't want to burden you with yet."

"Then let me move in with you."

Agnes chuckled, then groaned in pain. "Melissa, I can't take care of you. Who will cook for you? Take care of you in the morning? Drive you to school? I'm not getting out of the hospital on my own two legs, that's for sure. I don't know if I will ever walk again."

"Take a handmaiden or two with you. We can't keep Ruby and Topa apart. Topa's sad."

The two humans peered at us cuddling on the floor. Melissa's eyes wavered in sorrow, but Agnes had a faint, almost comforting smile.

"You can visit me every weekend," she said. "Maybe even stop by after school. Topa can visit Ruby any time."

"I want to be with you."

Agnes embraced her sister. "I know. But we can't."

She kissed Melissa on the head and kept her in her arms until the small human finally freed herself of her sister's loving embrace.

"I'll keep your address secret," Melissa said. "And I'll visit you every day. And when you're better I'll move in with you."

"Okay," Agnes chuckled. "You go, now. The parents are waiting for you."

The young girl nodded, sniffing loudly, and kissed her sister on the head before rushing out. She had to hail Topa for her to follow, as the ninetales refused to break from her cuddle with me, and I let her go with a whimper. There would be no conversation for us that day - possibly forever.

The Saturday that followed, as promised, Doctor Belish and the police commissioner stood by Agnes's bed, wearing their full uniforms together with their impressive lineups of medals, both holding their hats in their hands by their hearts. Ilma sat by her trainer's right leg, slightly behind him, and the commissioner had, to my surprise, his talonflame with him, perched on his shoulder in absolute silence.

I laid against my trainer's side, her arm gently wrapped around me.

"Doctor Belish, Sir," Agnes said from her bed. "Forgive me for not standing."

"It would be criminal of us to ask you to," the commissioner replied with a large smile. "How are you feeling?"

Agnes shrugged. "I'm fine, considering. My entire body hurts, I have trouble breathing, I can hardly move, but, you know. I'm alive." She tightened her hold of me. "I have Ruby to thank for that."

"And you have us to blame for being in this situation."

"I don't think so. It was my decisions that led to all this. My inability to bond with my pokemon."

She coughed again, letting me go to hold a hand over her mouth and push the cannula into her nose so it wouldn't be shot out, then groaned and whimpered in pain as her arms returned to me.

"Let's get to the point," she said in a rare.

The commissioner nodded and pulled a small machine with a grid facing us and a few buttons on its side - probably a recording device. "Right. So, tell us what happened. Just what happened for now - you can give us your theories later. You have a theory, don't you?"

Agnes let out a deep sigh and began petting me, nodding without looking at her superiors. "When we made it to the edge of the Gloss Forest, Ruby immediately began behaving weirdly. She would smell things very intently, but she said she hadn't picked up any scents, and kept shaking her head when I asked her. I think I know what she was trying to tell me."

"After," Belish ordered.

Ilma and I nodded slowly. If Agnes had finally understood the lack of scents, it would be the greatest clue we had found so far. The humans needed to know.

"She showed me her progress on telekinesis while we were having a short lunch break, and we continued. I could tell she was nervous. Maybe even scared. She would peek at the forest regularly and kept her nose by the dirt. She kept that up until nightfall, and then she stopped and sniffed at the air. She was panicked."

Agnes and I shuddered in unison as images returned to me - and probably to her - the lack of smell that I remembered making me choke. She pulled me up to lay me on her chest and began petting me with a reassuring but trembling hand.

Agnes's voice wavered as she continued. "Then, there was a smell of rot. It was so bad I nearly vomited. And a giant white hand floated from the Gloss Forest."

"Excuse me?" the commissioner said. "A... giant white hand?"

Agnes nodded. "It was an illusion, of course, but I had no idea at the time. It was..." she shuddered again, and tears began falling from her eyes. "It was horrible. A giant severed hand, as tall as me, rotting and bleeding, with red nails so long and so sharp they looked like claws. And it floated there by the trees. It had no eyes but I could tell it was looking at us. And then, something wet touched me, and I was paralysed. It was a haunter."

Belish and the commissioner peered at each other with concerned frowns.

"You were attacked by a haunter?"

"Yes," Agnes whispered, her voice breaking.

She began sobbing and sniffing loudly, holding me against her as she could. I turned my head to the side with the intent to lick her cheek, but refrained, and put my head on her neck instead, wrapping myself around her as I could. By our sides, the two policemen remained perfectly silent, respecting Agnes's grief and trauma.

"There were voices," she continued through her tears. "Human voices. More haunter appeared and Ruby and I fought them off, until the men showed themselves. They wore long white robes similar to that of the old cleric order, and black masks. I couldn't see their faces. One of them gagged me so I couldn't keep assisting Ruby. They" - her body was shaken by a powerful sob - "they talked about killing her. And then..."

Her eyes lost in the great unknowns of her memory, she remained silent for several seconds, perfectly still as she stared at things in front of her that only she could see. All of us looked at her, but I was the only one displaying a worried frown - Belish and the commissioner had respectfully expectant stares.

Then, she broke into tears.

She covered her face with her hands, wailing loudly, and freed herself from me to flop into a fetal position on her side, her legs seizing as she hunched up on her stomach.

"It hurts," she cried. "It hurts."

Confused and worried, I hopped over her to see her again, and dug into her arms still covering her to frantically poke her with my head. Her hands liberated her face, palpating my back as if she were blind, until they found my side and she pulled me against her.

She wept into my flank for several minutes, her right hand on my other side to keep me against her and her left one running along my back to soothe herself, with me licking her hair in an attempt to comfort her as she repeated the same phrase in an irregular pattern.

Belish and the commissioner stood in silence, heads down. When I peered at them in search for help, they leered at each other with stares that were meaningful only to them. I didn't know what they were wordlessly agreeing on - I needed help to pull Agnes out of her crisis.

Once she stopped crying, it took her another few minutes to return to her neutral position, keeping me held against her, but gently turning down my attempts to continue comforting her. Yet, her sniffing and sobbing didn't stop - but they no longer stopped her from speaking.

"They talked about a lab and experiments," she whispered, wiping her tears. "One of the haunter used a real version of Shadow Claw to gut me. Ruby tried to burn them, but she was knocked out when I fell. I saw mist and..."

Her voice trailed off, but she didn't finish her sentence, her eyes lost looking for something that existed only in her mind. There was a silence.

"So the attacks have been orchestrated by a group of men," the commissioner said. "They are using haunter to kill fire-type pokemon, and are performing some unknown experiments, I assume on the bodies."

"That is what I gathered, yes. And, now that I know how important the sense of smell is to animals, I think I know what Ruby noticed."

"What do you mean?"

Her eyes wandered across the room, and locked on me. "The way Ruby behaved," she whispered. "She was frantic. Lost. I wasn't wrong when I said she hadn't picked up any scents, but not in the way I meant. I think she was not smelling anything at all."

My eyes widened, and I stood violently, barking with energy, my tails wagging enthusiastically. Belish peered at Ilma, who nodded gravely.

"It seems you understood correctly," he said. "So there were no scents in the forest at all?"

His question was towards me, and I nodded rapidly.

"What about the bodies? Same thing?"

I nodded again.

"I think it makes sense," Agnes said, her voice still exhausted from crying. "The white hand was an illusion. We know that Ghost-type pokemon can create illusions, they're probably responsible for the ghost stories that surround the Glossy Hills. Maybe even for the lights." I barked loudly and shook my head. "No? Either way, if they can play with a person's vision, why could they not also play with their other senses? That would explain why the clerics are using haunter. They're predators, so they can kill their targets, and with the power to modify senses, they can perfectly cover their traces. That's why they've been impossible to catch."

"This all makes a lot of sense," Belish said. "The discovery that Ghost-type pokemon may be able to toy with all senses is... concerning. We will submit this to the pokemon research centre for review. In your name."

"I don't know if it should be in my name," Agnes said.

"Why not? You made that hypothesis."

"Circumstances."

There was another silence. Agnes wiped her tears again, then brought me against her to lay her cheek against me. I pushed my head against her ear, causing her to giggle softly.

"This is bad," the commissioner said. "Based on what you are saying, we are not facing a lone serial killer, but an organised group. One that, somehow, knew haunter could manipulate senses before our scientists did. We are at a great disadvantage when it comes to information. We know nothing of them, but they know everything of us."

"How did scientists not know that?" Agnes asked. "Were there never any experiments on the powers of haunter?"

"No," Belish said. "It is outlawed to experiment on humans and pokemon, even harmless tests. There was no way this could have been verified. And haunter is not a legal pokemon to have, so we can't just ask trainers either."

Not legal? Why would some pokemon not be legal to own? Endangered species, maybe? Then, why would haunter be illegal?

The commissioner nodded. "Then, we are left with a few more questions. Who these people are, what their goal is, and why they target fire-type police pokemon."

I barked again, gathering attention to myself, and froze. How could I communicate my own conclusions? I had an answer for that last question - at the very least an hypothesis.

I turned my head to Ilma. "Ilma, I know why they target specific sorts of pokemon?"

She frowned. "Why?"

"It's our powers. The lights in the forest, they are the Will-O-Wisp move. It undoes the powers of ghost pokemon. That's why they target us, so that we don't reveal them."

"Do you know it?"

I shook my head. "No. How do I tell them?"

"Use your powers. Agnes will know."

It took me a few seconds of reflection to figure out what to do. I gently extracted myself from Agnes's comfortable embrace and jumped to the floor, rushing towards the bathroom of her hospital room to pick up some toilet paper which I brought her. She held it with a confused frown, allowing me to pick a sheet off of it, which I deposited onto the ground, away from everyone and everything.

I took a step back, thinking. My vision turned blue again, but instead of flicking my power at the paper, I sneaked it under the sheet, then threw real fire towards it as I jolted it upwards. The paper caught on fire as it flew into the air, and my focus shifted to the aura surrounding my body, which I pierced with several holes, pouring power through them and covering myself in unfire.

The humans watched me work with bewilderment.

"I did not know Ruby knew Flame Charge," Belish said.

"No," Agnes said. "That's not what she's saying. She's showing all her powers. The fire, telekinesis, Flame Charge. It's something related to her powers. Is that why these men target fire-types? Because of their powers?"

I nodded again, then frowned, and shook my head with one single bark.

"Because of one power?" Agnes asked. I nodded. "Can you show us?"

I shook my head, blushing in shame.

"She can't use it," she concluded.

"Your communication with your pokemon has improved drastically," Doctor Belish said. "For all the bad it's done, this trip was successful."

"It was needed," Agnes said. "We could not have found all this information without it."

"I will submit a request to the general of armies to have a military lockdown of the forest," the commissioner said. "And a request for scientists to study the powers of Ghost-type pokemon for the sake of this investigation."

Agnes sat up as she could with a loud groan. "Wait," she said. "Lockdown? My parents' mansion is within the boundaries of the forest."

"Then I fear their mansion is no longer safe to live in. I will personally contact them to let them know."

Agnes paled, eyes wide as she stared at the commissioner. She gave a hint of opening her mouth several times, but never said anything, and her stare wandered with distress around the room. Although I jumped back on the bed to lay on her and offer her comfort, she didn't move.

"Will my family be safe?" she asked. "They were here just a few minutes ago."

"They haven't left," the commissioner replied. "I asked them to stay, I wanted to question them on their decision to disown you. Cinder, would you be so kind as to fetch them?"

The large talonflame turned its noble head towards his trainer and nodded. He flew onto Belish's raised arm, who accompanied him and opened the door for him, then took off, manoeuvring with surprising ease in the narrow corridors in which he barely fit.

"Sir, I can't see them again. I just told them I wanted them out of my life."

The commissioner leered at Agnes with a frown between confusion and disapproval, then raised his head, looking down on her with authoritative disdain.

"You will have to suffer them this once more," he said in a tone that made it clear he was giving her an order.

"Yes, sir."

As we were waiting for her family to return, Ilma walked towards her and jumped on her bed, sniffing the sheets and sneaking under them to look at the bandage. She said nothing of what she was doing, even when I inquired, and eventually walked up to Agnes's head, who shyly gave her a few pets, avoiding her damaged fin. I glared at her with envy, but she snickered in my direction and hopped down, and Agnes pulled me over to pet me.

Melissa walked in first, then ran towards her sister - only to stop abruptly, intimidated by the two soldiers in uniform. The large talonflame waddled into the room, then flew back onto his trainer's shoulder.

"Come here," Agnes said.

She waved her arms and Melissa calmly walked into them as her parents entered, but were kept away by the commissioner.

"Doctor Belish," Sir said with a respectful nod. "What is the meaning of this? Why have we been summoned back?"

"There have been developments," the commissioner said in a sharp tone. "Your mansion is located within the boundaries of the Gloss Forest, isn't it?"

"It is, yes. We bought it at an auction many years ago, before Agnes was born."

"We we will be closing down the forest for good. It is no longer safe to live in. You and your family are required to move."

Sir didn't reply. Melissa stared at the two policemen with fear, and huddled up into Agnes's arms. Topa ran to her, standing by her feet and keeping her tails in contact with the young girl's legs, as Sir and Madam peered at each other with confusion.

"You can't just remove us from our home," she said.

The commissioner glared at her. "I can. The area is not safe. I will have the military close the forest. Nobody will be allowed in unless by my executive order."

Sir moved to the side to hold his wife, who jolted in surprise. "Understood, Commissioner. We own several other houses through the country, we will move to another one."

Madam peered at her husband in shock. "But..."

"How long do we have to move out?" Sir interrupted.

His wife gulped from the dryness of his tone, and gave him a servile nod without trying to contest anymore.

"About a week," the commissioner replied.

"Sir," Melissa said. "What about Agnes? Where will she live?"

"I understand Agnes was in the process of purchasing an apartment?"

"Yes," she groaned. "I just need to call."

"Then it's settled. She will move into the apartment, and you and your parents will move to whatever residence they choose. Given that Agnes is not currently operational and will remain in the hospital for an unknown amount of time, police will handle moving her effects for her."

"Melissa knows my room," Agnes groaned. "She can guide them."

I barked loudly to catch everyone's attention, then began whining, my eyes locked on Topa. The ninetales mirrored my whimpering and stood to be able to lick me.

"We can't separate them," Melissa said. "Topa takes care of Ruby. She will be sad."

"I'm afraid there is no choice," the commissioner replied. "You must be kept away from the woods for your safety. Your ninetales can keep you safe."

Our whimpering only increased in intensity at the news, and I couldn't stop myself from beginning to cry.

I didn't want to be separated from Topa for good. She was far too important for me - and her whining in unison with me indicated she felt the same way. We had gone through too much together. She would fall back into depression. Why could Melissa not move in with Agnes and a few maids? Why could they not move somewhere close in the town?

Agnes patted her sister's head as well as Topa's. "It's all right. This is only temporary until we catch the killers. You need to go with them, you will be safe. Topa, please don't be sad. You will be with Ruby too eventually. It's just for some time."

The ninetales vigorously shook her head, then turned to Melissa with another whimper.

"You want to stay with Ruby, don't you?" the young girl asked.

Topa nodded slowly, and Melissa lowered her head, deep in thought.

"Then I give Topa to Agnes," she finally announced.

Madam finally broke out of her silence to shout, "What?"

"I give Topa to Agnes," Melissa repeated. "I won't need to be protected if we move away. Agnes does. And we can't keep Ruby and Topa away from each other."

"Topa is your pokemon," Madam insisted. "You can't just abandon her."

Agnes glared at her, and Melissa turned around, challenging her mother's gaze.

"I am not abandoning her. This is for her sake, and for Agnes's sake." She turned to the policemen. "Since I own Topa, I am allowed to give her to my sister, right?"

"Indeed," Doctor Belish said, repressing an amused smile. "It takes very little paperwork to do. I can have a policeman give you the papers and guide you through them."

"That is very noble of you," Sir said. "Are you sure you want to give Topa to Agnes? You won't have your pokemon anymore."

"If I don't, then Topa won't have Ruby anymore," Melissa said. "I was never a good trainer for her anyway, right? That's what I learnt from Agnes and Ruby. But now they're friends. Topa deserves a friend, too. One better than me."

A tear fell from her eye, and she gave the ninetales a genuine but distressed smile. Agnes kissed her sister on the head, but didn't try to talk her out of her idea, and nodded proudly towards her instead. Front paws on the bed, Topa stared alternatively at Melissa and me, confused and lost.

"Topa," Melissa said. The ninetales snapped her gaze to her trainer. "I give you to Agnes, okay? Keep her safe. Keep Ruby safe, too."

Topa nodded, and Melissa held her cheeks to give her a long kiss on the head, then abruptly broke away and walked back to her parents, sniffing.

"It is settled, then," the commissioner said. He turned to Agnes's parents. "I need to talk to you two. Doctor Belish, I will entrust you with overseeing the moving of Agnes's belongings to her new apartment."

"Sure. I suppose we can have her backpack returned to her now that she's out of danger."

The commissioner nodded, then walked out of the room, Agnes's family in tow. Melissa shot one last desperate glance at Topa, then a smile, and disappeared into the corridor.

Belish turned to my human. "Between us, Agnes, I would like you to see a therapist. I can get you in contact with one of the army's psychiatrists. They are trained to deal with... that sort of thing."

"Please do," Agnes whispered. "What will happen to me now?"

"From what your doctor said, you should make a good recovery. You should be able to walk without issues eventually, but you will be weak for months if not years, and you will be sore for the rest of your life."

"But... my projects?"

"Given your predicament, I don't think we can accept your application for SWAT anymore. Your health no longer permits it. You will have to fall back to your second choice, but given your contribution to this investigation already, I think you will have a great career as a detective."

"I see," Agnes whispered, unable to hide her disappointment. "Will I still be promoted to sergeant once I graduate?"

Doctor Belish nodded. "Of course. You remain part of the military since you will still be a police officer, and as far as I can tell, you are still female" - Agnes chuckled with amusement, then groaned, tensing up - "so you will still have the default rank for women. You now have two pokemon, though. Do you want to bring Topa to your classes as well?"

The ninetales vigorously shook her head.

"She doesn't want to," Agnes said. "So no."

"Fair."

Ilma walked up to Topa and stared at her as the ninetales removed her paws from the bed and stared back.

"Shame," the vaporeon said. "I can tell you're strong. You would have made a fine addition to police ranks."

"I have no interest in serving police," Topa said. "All I want is to care for Ruby, and now for Agnes as well."

"Noble. I can understand that. I would very much like to spar with you one day."

"When time permits."

Ilma smiled wholeheartedly, then turned around and heeled her trainer as he too turned around to leave.

"Doctor," Agnes said.

Belish stopped and looked back. "Yes?"

"Is it possible to dream while in a coma?"

The doctor raised his eyes for a second, thoughtful. "Yes. A lot of coma patients report having extremely vivid dreams while unconscious. Some even report being unable to tell the dream apart from reality. Why?"

"I had a... strange dream."

"Something to discuss with your therapist, I suppose."

Agnes looked around the room, then nodded without a word, and Belish left the room, leaving her alone with us two pokemon - soon her two pokemon.

Chapter 50

"Good morning, Ruby", Agnes said.

Three weeks after testifying, Agnes had been discharged from the hospital and moved into her new flat. It had only been a few days, but we had already established a routine that took into account the meticulous care she needed for her difficult recovery.

Topa hopped down from the queen-sized bed where she and I had been cuddling our human, and left the room. With a pained groan, Agnes carefully rotated to the side to seize her phone as the ninetales rushed to the bathroom and I walked up to her, sniffing at her forehead. It was only slightly moist, and I shook my head.

"Nothing?" she asked. "Good. That might explain why I feel more rested." She peered at her phone and grunted. "Not even eight in the morning. I have some time before Rakuen comes in."

She laid back down, shuddering slightly, and pulled me in to lay on her. Topa returned quickly, her eyes glowing with a faint light blue colour as a small box of medication hovered towards Agnes.

"Thank you, Topa."

The young woman straightened her back, pulled a pill from the box, then gave the package back to Topa as she seized a water bottle on her nightstand and gulped the drug. She put the bottle back and laid down again, absently petting me with one hand, and holding her phone with the other. The ninetales joined us soon after, but opted to lay by Agnes's legs instead of on her torso.

"Today is Saturday," she said. "I'm going to need to shower." She grimaced. "Not fun. Are you sure you don't want to join me?"

I lifted my head to vigorously shake it. A faint amused smile decorated Agnes's face, and she brought me to her mouth to give

me a kiss. I opened my muzzle to give her a quick lick on the cheek in return, but refrained, and barked gently instead, looking towards her stomach.

"It's still hurting," she said. "The painkiller will take some time to take effect, but I'll be fine. Rehab yesterday wasn't as bad as it usually is." She let out a deep sigh and peered at her phone again. "Oh, Derek might visit today, he hasn't seen me since the hospital. I don't know if he will bring Pico this time, though. It's been over a month since you saw them, right?"

I nodded, and my eyes avoidantly moved away from my human. I wasn't too sure I wanted to see Pico again - and I certainly didn't want him to see Agnes in this wounded state as he probably didn't realise how bad her situation really was, having been denied entry to her room in the hospital - but I missed his unshakeable enthusiasm and protective he was of me. At the same time, I wasn't sure I was comfortable with him meeting Topa. I had no idea how they would react to each other.

I wanted to see Ilma. We hadn't seen each other since Agnes's testimony. Besides what we had heard from news reporters, we hadn't had any news from police either. The silence was beginning to worry me.

Agnes's hands on my body made those worries go away.

We cuddled in silence for several minutes. Her breathing was no longer raspy or laborious, but her breaths were shallow and quick, causing her to try to take deeper ones that made her groan. She kept a hand wrapped around me and petted me with the other as I laid on her chest above her breasts, my head locked between her chin and her collarbones, and my tails wagging rapidly.

An annoyed grunt escaped me when the doorbell rang.

Agnes let one out as well. "Whose turn is it today? Ruby?"

I barked to confirm and wiggled out of her comfortable embrace to run through the large apartment towards the door. Rushing to the interphone placed next to the front door, I stood on my back legs, leaning against the wall, dislodged the phone with my muzzle, and barked into it.

Rakuen's voice came from the device. "Ruby? Good morning! Would you let me in?"

I barked again, and extended a leg to push the button that opened the door to the apartment building. A buzzer rang somewhere far as I held my paw on the button, then the sound of a door being opened. I let go of the wall and sat at a respectable distance from the entrance.

There was a knock at the unlocked door a few minutes after, and Rakuen let herself in with a smile. Instead of her black and white uniform, she wore tight jeans and a white sweater with semi-long blue sleeves the same colour as her pants that formed a stripe along the edge of her round collar. Her shoes were perfectly clean white semi boots she had tucked her jeans into, with a thick sole but not much of a heel, and tightened upon her feet by thick laces I was tempted to chew on. She had a large backpack and carried with her a white plastic bag.

"Good morning, Ruby", she said, kneeling to give me a few pets.

She raised the white bag over her head as I began intently sniffing it - it smelled like the berries Agnes and I had eaten on our trip.

"No," she said. "Don't touch this, it's for later."

She deposited her bags on the large central island of our oversized kitchen, took off her shoes, and went to the bedroom. I didn't bother investigating the bag of berries further and heeled her instead.

"Good morning, miss Trokair," Rakuen said.

"Morning," Agnes groaned.

She sat up on her bed, having dragged herself back in order to rest her back against the wall, both of her hands resting on her stomach, fingers clenched into tense claws. Topa had not woken up from the movement and remained asleep at the foot of the bed.

The maid helped my human scoot to the edge and turn around to put her feet on the ground, lifting her opaque night gown so that it wouldn't get in the way, then dragged something to her that looked like a mix between a step-ladder and a chair, with the two front legs ending with small wheels, and a net in front of the seat. Agnes struggled to stand, her legs covered by compression stockings shivering as soon as they had to support her, and seized the walker with trembling hands.

"I hate this," she whispered. "It's humiliating."

"It's required for your legs and abdomen to regain strength," the maid said. "Is the nurse coming today?"

"Yes. We have about an hour."

"Let's get you breakfast quickly then."

I hopped onto the bed, gently licking Topa's head to wake her up as Agnes staggered towards the kitchen, lifting the part of the walker that was close to her to push her forward once she was secure on her two weakened legs. Rakuen tailed her, keeping her hands up to catch her should she stumble, and they made their way to the other room without problem. It took a bit of effort to wake the ninetails up, but when she noticed Agnes trying to walk in the distance, she stretched and followed me.

"What is this?" Agnes asked as she sat on her walker by the island, pointing to the white bag.

Rakuen had pulled a few pans from the cupboards, as well as milk and eggs from the fridge, and turned around.

"I went to the market to get the berries you mentioned," she said.
"Three of each, as you requested."

Agnes pulled them out of the bag. There were five kinds - one pink that resembled a peach and that I had loved, one of a strangely vibrant blue colour that looked like an apple, two resembling grapes but purple and orange, and the last one similar to an oversized lemon - all of which I had tried in the forest. She inspected them with a large smile.

"All right. Rakuen, you get half of mine. Ruby, Topa, come here."

"What?" the maid cried, turning around. "Agnes, I can't eat pokemon berries. I've tried before and I got horribly sick."

"I promised Ruby I would try these once I was home," Agnes replied.
"Unfortunately, things happened and the berries I collected rotted, but now I'm home so I'm going to keep my word."

She directed a large smile to me, and I barked with enthusiasm in return. Topa and I sat by the table, waiting patiently.

"You shouldn't eat them either," Rakuen said with a concerned frown.
"You're going to have severe vomiting. Are you even able to?"

Agnes looked down at the berries, her gaze becoming bitter and serious. "Oh, I can. I spent most of the first week vomiting everything I was given. It was good news, they said, it proved that my stomach was unharmed and was able to constrict itself, so the cut wasn't as deep as it could have been. It hurt so bad I refused to eat anything and they ended up feeding me through an IV line. So, if I'm going to vomit the berries, so be it. At least this time it will be my choice."

She picked the lemon-looking berries, gave one to each of us two pokemon, and cut herself a small part. She held it up to her eyes,

elbows resting on the marble top of the island, breathing rapidly. Finally, she turned to us and smiled.

"Eat up," she said.

She threw the piece of berry in her mouth as Topa and I began eating ours.

She shuddered with a disgusted wince. After a few seconds, her grimace disappeared, and she chuckled gently instead - until her belly reminded her of its state and she groaned in pain.

"Looks like I'm one of the lucky few," she said. "Let's try the others."

The others passed just as well, although they were all accompanied by more or less severe faces of disgust. Once she was done, she gathered her dented berries, and gestured for Rakuen to take them.

"I guess you can add these in for lunch or dinner," she said as the maid picked up the fruits. "We'll keep the rest as treats for Topa and Ruby for the next few days."

Breakfast was quick. Agnes was still unable to eat much, and with all the berries she had tried bits of, there was probably little room left in her stomach. She gave an entire egg from her plate to Topa and I each, which we carefully ate with wagging tails, and I got to drink the rest of her coffee cup - the ninetales having tried coffee before and hating it - while Rakuen began cleaning the kitchen and Topa was given a bowl of hot milk.

The ninetales was the one who went to open the door when it rang again, and the nurse let herself in, wearing casual clothing, but carrying two backpacks with her. She didn't greet either of us pokémon - she was still a stranger to us - but greeted Rakuen by her first name and gave her one of her bags. My human had been forcing herself to limp around the flat, haunched over her walker to keep herself standing, and was panting on her bed when the health professional entered.

The nurse crossed the gigantic flat, ignoring the enormous living room she passed through, to join Agnes in her room. I followed her closely, tails and ears laid, while Topa opted to withdraw to one of our numerous sofas.

"Good morning, Agnes," the intruder said with a large smile. "How are you doing?"

"Good morning. I'm doing okay. Pain is getting better slowly, but I don't feel like I'm making any progress on walking."

"It will take time. I've brought you a new chansey egg."

Agnes groaned with a grimace worse than she had when she tried the berries. "Do I have to eat these things?"

"No. But your recovery will be ten to twenty-five percent faster if you do. So, for you, it will cut your four months of rehab into just three."

"I'm likely going to have to repeat the year anyway," Agnes said, her voice shaking with disappointment. "One fewer month of being crippled won't change anything for me. And I don't even know if I will recover enough to continue my studies at all."

"I would advise you eat them still."

Agnes held her breath for a moment, then let out a long tired sigh.

"Let's get the shower and bandage over with," she said. Then, she called, "Rakuen?"

"I'll get the shower ready," the maid shouted from the kitchen.

She passed by the door of the living room, rushing through the corridor to disappear into the bathroom next to Agnes's bedroom. A noise of running water was heard shortly after.

While the maid busied herself preparing the shower and the material that would be needed to care for her master, the nurse helped Agnes

up similarly to how Rakuen had an hour before, then held a ready hand in front of her as she stumbled with the walker towards the bathroom. My human turned her head to me before going away with a failed attempt at a smile - replaced with a worried frown in anticipation of the unpleasant exercise that taking a shower was - and, as before, I stood where I was in silence, staring back and fretting, knowing that she was about to go through a painful process and there was nothing I could do to help her.

Topa peeked from the living room. "Shall we continue?"

"I'm coming," I said.

I opted to follow Agnes to the bathroom with encouraging barks while on my way. Although the nurse frowned in anger towards me, Agnes smiled wholeheartedly.

"Have you changed your mind?" I shook my head. "Are you just trying to cheer me up? Thank you. I'll be all right, you go play with Topa until I'm out."

I barked once more, and withdrew - ignoring the nurse who closed the bathroom door behind me with a satisfied grunt - to join the ninetales in the living room.

It was a room only slightly smaller than the living room in the mansion. To the right from the door, a set of white sofas were arranged in a half-square around a large low table made of perfectly polished black marble, with two strong legs that spanned its length and left a hole through which Topa and I could sneak or hide. Each of the sofas bore two square pillows - one white and one black - save for the two at the ends, placed perpendicularly compared to the others and forming the parallel sides of the half-square, which had brown and yellow pillows. Facing these seats was a large cupboard spanning most of the wall, from the corner to the door, and comprised of countless doors and drawers that surrounded a large open area in its centre, occupied by an oversized television that was currently turned off. To its right, embedded in the wall against which

it rested, a delicately ornate fireplace of grey marble blended into the wall surrounding it, popping out of it slightly as its top was being used as a makeshift shelf that bore Agnes's precious gem collection. On the other side, several smaller arrangements of seats surrounded smaller tables, except for a large table on the opposite side of the door compared in relation to the television. The grey walls and wooden floor were not decorated, and a bay window protected by rolling steel shutters by the dining table replaced the fourth wall facing the door.

Topa stood by the low table, one of the yellow pillows laid on the floor in front of her.

"Let us try again today," she said. "Remember: you must surround the object with your power, lest you lose control of it."

I nodded and focused. As before, my vision turned to a light blue colour, and I projected my energy onto the pillow. I didn't accidentally fling it away from pushing it with too much energy this time, but was still unable to surround it properly, and instead of throwing it across the room, I flipped it back to its place on the sofas.

Topa observed its trajectory with an amused giggle. "You are making progress. Try moving your energy around it earlier, then closing it in. Keep trying, I think you will figure it out soon."

Such had our routine been for almost a week. When Agnes was showering, or when she was sleeping - as she often did, for she needed copious amounts of rest - Topa and I withdrew to the living room in silence and the ninetales did her best to continue where Pride had left off so that I could learn telekinesis. I had not made as much progress as I would have expected, and was still struggling to seize objects with my power, but the ninetales had, as usual, shown herself to be a far better and far more patient teacher than Pride. I was doing my best to learn, but the shadow of my failure to protect my trainer loomed over me, and every effort I made was tainted with the fear that I would once again prove myself to be unworthy of her.

When Agnes walked out, supported by both Rakuen and the nurse, she was panting, and shimmering strips fell from her eyes to illuminate her cheeks when exposed to the strong lights of the ceiling. Save for the enormous bandage covering her entire abdomen and her compression stockings, she was naked, and her hair was still wet.

Rakuen hurried to the sofas, pushing the pillows away to make room, and covered the area she had created with clean towels on which Agnes was laid. The nurse then proceeded to change her bandage while Topa and I kept ourselves at a respectful distance in order not to risk leaving any fur on Agnes's sensitive wound.

"You should probably get some rest on weekends," the nurse said. "You shouldn't be this tired, even after a wound like this. Have you been overexerting yourself?"

"No," Agnes said, panting. She wiped the remnants of her tears from her cheeks. "Just the exercise the physiotherapist gave me. Some walking around the flat."

"No playing with your pokemon?"

"No, not yet."

The nurse frowned and remained silent. As she turned around to shove the dirty dressing in a bag, Agnes ruefully seized her arm.

"What does it mean?" she asked. "Why the face?"

"Everybody heals differently," the nurse replied after a delay. "Sometimes, people in perfect health don't recover well from a wound that others who are not as healthy recover from easily."

"What does it mean?" Agnes repeated in a pressing tone.

The nurse looked at her, then at her stomach, and away. "Your struggling to move now, and your general exhaustion even with idle

tasks like a shower, indicate you likely won't recover well from this. You will be able to walk, but I don't think you will be able to do any form of strenuous activities anymore. That includes your police work."

Agnes's face deflated as reality dawned on her. Still clenching on the nurse's sleeve, she slowly moved her eyes down, then from left to right, her mouth slightly ajar. She peered at her legs extended on the sofa, then away again.

"No," she whispered. "I won't let that happen."

"Miss, please let go of my sleeve."

Agnes released her grip of the nurse's clothing with an apology.

"Take what I say with a grain of salt," the health professional said. "I'm just a nurse, and it is too early to tell. I would still advise you take some rest at least this weekend so that you don't end up damaging yourself further. Please bring this up with your physiotherapist when you see them next."

"I will. Thank you. I'm sorry I grabbed you."

The nurse gathered her belongings, wished Rakuen and Agnes a good weekend, and hurried out of the room. As the maid dried my human's hair and eventually helped her put some clothes on - in the form of a simple summer dress - I continued Topa's exercises until Agnes asked me for my attention. Topa and I both walked to her, but while I jumped on the sofa to lay on my trainer's chest again, Topa sat on the floor.

"I've been thinking about battles," she said. "There are many moves I want you to learn but I don't want to overwhelm you, so I've made myself a priority list. The most important move I think you need to learn is Flamethrower, but that one shouldn't be much of a problem, right?" I nodded with a confident bark. "With that, you'll have great offensive options together with Flame Charge, so fire-type is

covered. So, looking into other types, I'll need you to learn Confuse Ray as soon as possible, as well as Quick Attack to move quickly, and Extrasensory to fight opponents against which fire is weak. Topa knows all these moves, so she can teach you. Do you think you can do that for me?"

I barked again. Flamethrower wouldn't be an issue at all - it was probably just a sustained Ember - and Extrasensory would be easy once I figured out telekinesis, but Confuse Ray might prove to be a problem, especially if I had as much trouble creating Dark energy as I had learning to create Psychic energy.

"Now, there are a few other moves I want you to learn that Topa does not know. Energy Ball is the most important - since it's a Grass type, it will enable you to fight all opponents who have a type advantage over you. I also want you to learn Dig and Iron Tail to have a few more offensive moves in reserve, and Disable to have some control over your opponent. Then, the last difficult bit will be fighting Dragon type pokemon. It's unlikely, but not impossible. The only move I can think of that you could learn is Draining Kiss, but I can't think of anybody who could have that, so I have no idea where you could learn it. Extrasensory will do, I guess, even though it's a neutral one."

She marked a pause and moved her loving gaze towards me. I stared back, but remained silent.

"So, in short, I want you to learn Flamethrower, Confuse Ray, Quick Attack, and Extrasensory as soon as possible. Then I'll have you trained with Energy Ball, Dig, Iron Tail, and finally Disable. Is that okay? Am I asking too much?"

I nodded in response to her first question, then quickly yelped inquisitively and shook my head.

"Wonderful! Topa can teach you most of them already. Pico knows Dig and Iron Tail. I'll have to look into it to find someone who can teach you Energy Ball and Disable, there are probably a few of my

classmates who could help. That can wait, though, and" - she gestured towards her legs - "it will have to. Focus on the ones Topa can teach you while we're stuck here, okay?"

I nodded again. By the sofa, Topa peered at me with an excited smile and wagging tails, and I returned the grin.

"We have much to look forward to," she said. "Since you will be learning new moves, I think now would be the right time to teach you Will-O-Wisp as well. It will be a pleasant surprise for Agnes."

My tails began wagging with force. "Really?" I shouted.

"Of course," she said, her smile widening. "It should not be too difficult now that you have started using basic telekinesis. Flamethrower will probably only take you a few hours to learn - it took me about a day when my mother taught me. Confuse Ray will be the more difficult one, for it requires a type of energy you do not yet know how to conjure, and Quick Attack should be somewhere in the middle."

"When are we starting?"

Topa remained silent for a second. "I would suggest we start next Monday, and take this chance to rest with Agnes. You did not rest much while with that vaporeon, did you?"

"I left a week ago, I'm okay. I want to start learning now!"

"Be patient," the ninetales said with an amused giggle. "Next Monday."

I let out an annoyed grunt, but acquiesced with a short nod. Agnes was stuck home for the next few months. There would be plenty of time for me to learn new moves.

And plenty of time to enjoy her survival.

Chapter 51

Whimpering noises pulled me out of my peaceful slumber.

Next to me in her bed, Agnes shivered and groaned as her arms and upper body shook in irregular spasms, her pillow drenched from the sweat pouring from her twitching face that slammed into it in response to the violence of her body's jerks. The sounds that escaped her were mostly animalistic in nature - distressed whimpers or calling yelps - but some words made it through her primal craze.

She called for me.

I stood from my laying position on her side and loomed over her face, tongue out, but froze. I couldn't lick her - not at the risk of worsening her nightmare or even causing her another panic attack as she woke up. By her legs, Topa had also woken up, but her head moved in abrupt bursts as she scanned her surroundings with a focused frown. Short on solutions, I moved towards her left arm that was previously wrapped around me and bit her wrist.

She jolted up with a deep breath then cried out in pain, both hands cramped upon her stomach. Eyes widened in panic, she glanced over the room for a moment, breathing heavily, then threw herself back with a groan to huddle up on herself and bury her face distorted in an expression of pain into her hands. When she finally calmed down and looked up, I leaned over her, smelling her with insistence and whining gently, my heart faltering when I caught a glimpse of the shiny trail that fell from her eyes.

"Ruby?"

She raised a hand that she put on my side, then on my belly. After palpating it for a second, she took a deep breath and released a long quivering sigh, and her gaze became avoidant as she softly pulled me in to lay against her again and began petting me.

"It happened again, didn't it?"

I nodded without a word.

Topa walked up to her, careful not to step on her wounded abdomen, and inquired with a quiet whimper.

"I'm okay, Topa," Agnes said, raising her other hand to also pet the ninetales.

She brought us both into her embrace, turning her head to lay it against my flank as I wrapped myself around her neck to protect her. The deep breaths she took did little to hide her repressed sobs and withdrawn tears, and she spent a few seconds nose in my fur to get a hold of herself.

"Three in the morning," she whispered, holding her phone. She continued muttering to herself, "Today's Wednesday, so that makes it four days in a row. I guess I really do need to mention it to the psychiatrist then. Do you think I'll be able to get any more sleep?"

I emitted a loud whimper and poked her wet forehead with my muzzle.

"I'll try to rest more. I'm sorry."

She gently pushed on my back to tell me to lay down, and I obeyed, pushing the top of my head against her forehead, Topa laying on her legs and nesting in the crest of her knees. Her breath was still laborious as we cuddled in silence and she ran her fingers in a slow hike along my spine, causing my tails to jolt when she removed her hand from their base to send it back to my head and reset its torment.

"Ruby," Agnes whispered.

Her voice was void of energy. Worried, I pushed myself away from her, inadvertently freeing myself from her weak petting to look her in

the eye. She wasn't even looking back at me, her despondent gaze turned down instead, staring at something I could not see. Once I was out of her embrace, she brought her right hand close to her shoulder, her left hand resting lifelessly by her head. Her beautiful fingers curled like the legs of a dead spider, she remained silent for a few seconds until I whimpered inquisitively.

She sighed, then looked up at me. Her widened eyes, accompanied by a distressed frown, stared right past me as she carefully avoided mine, her entire body shaking with her rapid and shallow breaths. She slowly lifted her hand again, giving a hint of putting it on my back, but let it drop back onto the bed with a defeated sigh and brought it to herself again to seize her own night gown. Topa raised her head with a chirp when the legs she had been resting on moved away from her as Agnes huddled up a little more on herself, cringing from the pain that the movement gave her.

Without looking at me, she whispered again, "If I asked you to kill me, would you do it?"

The world spun around me as my stomach sank.

How was I even supposed to answer? When had she reached that point? How had I not seen it?

I stood violently, barking with insistence and shaking my head from left to right so quickly that my neck immediately hurt. A loud whimper escaped me as I pushed my head against Agnes's again, and she sighed with a broken smile, gently pushing me away.

"I don't understand how you did it," she said. "It must have been so hard for you. You weren't even with your family. You were alone in a new place and among strangers." She chuckled, and her voice broke. "Not that my family would have done me any good."

Her arms trembled as she pulled me back into her embrace and kissed the top of my head.

"I wish I were a pokemon," she whispered, holding me tightly. "It took you only a month to recover from your wound. It's not fair. You're all so powerful and your bodies are so strong. Why do you even obey us pathetic humans? You and I have the same wound, but I am crippled for months while you could already move after a week. I wish I didn't have to go through this and the months of rehab I'll have to suffer. I wish I could just become one of you and heal in a month and then be happy like you are. I don't even understand why I'm not happy."

I rubbed my head against her, huddling closer into her embrace, and barked with encouragement. By her feet, Topa had stood up after her sleep had been disturbed, and walked behind Agnes to poke the back of her head. The ninetales did the same as our human looked back, then laid against her, the two of us pokemon forming a vice of love and cuddles in which we trapped her. She chuckled, grimaced, and chuckled again, then kissed both of us and turned her back to Topa to hold me against her chest, the ninetales scooting closer to push our human against me and lay her head on Agnes's shoulders.

"How have you been feeling?" Agnes's therapist asked.

He had come to the apartment early in the afternoon. My human laid on the largest of her sofas, wearing a casual dress and covered with a soft blanket, while I sat by her head in one of the armchairs adjacent to it. The psychiatrist had borrowed a chair from the kitchen and put it across the table from where Agnes was, the television to his back. Topa laid on the floor at his feet, her eyes locked on the intruder.

"Tired," Agnes said. "If I may be honest, I am running out of patience. The pain is exhausting and the painkillers aren't doing anything. I'm not allowed to go out, I can't walk even with the walker, I can't do anything on my own, I have to eat these disgusting eggs, and I am currently fully dependent on my maid and the nurse - it's frustrating and humiliating."

The therapist nodded and scribbled something on his large notepad. "It's understandable. I've seen a lot of people try to recover from wounds similar to yours. It is not just physically taxing. Most fall into depression and few ever recover." He raised his eyes. "Have you been feeling depressed lately? Any thoughts of giving up? Or more?"

Agnes's reply was immediate. "No."

I peered up, looking at her with a confused frown. She peeked at me with a broken smile in reply, and turned her attention back to the therapist.

"How is your recovery coming along?" he asked.

Agnes's voice cracked, betraying her disappointment. "Not well. I've been having trouble with simple tasks like standing in the shower. The nurse said I was unlikely to recover well and might have to give up on police work."

The psychiatrist raised his eyes from his notepad with a questioning frown. "I thought that was already the case? That your application for SWAT had already been rejected?"

"It has," Agnes said with a sniff. "I'll be studying to become a detective instead. Doctor Belish guaranteed I would keep my military rank too."

"Then you still have a great future ahead of you, yet you seem so disappointed by it."

"Of course I am. I wanted to get into SWAT."

Her therapist frowned and lifted his notepad, flipping the pages to go back through his notes.

"During our first appointment three weeks ago, you mentioned wanting to be a police officer because a policeman convinced you to keep going after your accident when you were a child, and you

wanted to be able to do the same for other people," he said. Agnes nodded. "Yet from the moment you entered the academy, you've made it clear SWAT was your objective. I fail to see the link between the two. Why not have detective be your first choice? You would certainly be able to help other people, or children, by being a detective, not a SWAT member."

Agnes blinked a few times. Her eyes then crept towards me, and a faint smile brightened her otherwise gloomy face.

"It was never about convincing people to keep going," she said, her gaze locked on me. "I realised that when I grew up. I thought I wanted to be a police officer because I wanted to help people, that's true, but in the end, what that officer did wasn't exactly convince me to keep going. I was still depressed when I went home. I never overcame that. All he did was save my life."

"Are you implying you would have killed yourself without him?"

"Yes," Agnes replied with surprising indifference.

The therapist peered at her from the top of his eyes, eyes widened in a strange knowing look, his mouth bent in obvious disapproval.

He cleared his throat. "That may be a topic for another time. Please continue."

"I realised that what I really wanted to do was save lives. I'm not intelligent enough to be a doctor or a nurse." My ears perked up, memories of her emotional talk with me coming back. "And, when I watched the detectives work, it occurred to me that they are not called to save lives. They're called once lives are already lost. So my best option was ground forces, and for saving lives, SWAT was the only logical choice. I certainly had no intention to be part of the standing army. Saving Ruby made me realise I was right about it, too. Saving her life did me a lot of good, even if I didn't treat her right after."

I raised my head with a short whine. Agnes chuckled gently and raised a hand towards me to give me a few pets, which I accepted with wagging tails.

The psychiatrist observed us with a neutral face. "It's good that you can mention that with a smile," he said. "That is great improvement from when I saw you in the hospital. Are you still having the nightmares?"

My human froze for a moment, then nodded with a heavy sigh. "They stopped when I moved in, but now I'm having them again."

"Since when?"

"Since the nurse left last Saturday."

Her doctor raised an eyebrow. "That was when the nurse told you you might not recover well, wasn't it?" Agnes nodded. "Are you willing to talk about them now?"

My human let out a deep sigh, turning her head to look at me with sorrow in her eyes, and agreed with a short head movement.

I stood from my armchair and hurried to her. Her therapist watched me nest under her blanket with wide eyes, blinking slowly, as Agnes wrapped an arm around me to keep me against her chest, smiling widely.

"Your pokemon is remarkably intelligent," he said. "She must have understood that talking about those nightmares is difficult and she is trying to comfort you."

"She is," my human replied with ostensible pride and a kiss on my head. "Neither she nor Topa have licked me since I woke up from my coma. I think she knows. No idea how, but she knows."

The therapist nodded in my direction. "Truly remarkable." He turned back to Agnes, adjusting his position on his seat and switching

pages on his notepad, ready to take notes. "So, tell me about the nightmares."

"It's always the same," my human sighed. "Ruby and I are walking along the Gloss Forest. It's night, the darker trees are on our right, there's the weird dirt strip, and we're about to stop to set up camp for the night."

My ears perked up as I found myself intently listening to Agnes's story. I could picture the area still in my mind - although when we went there, the dark trees were on our left - and my body became tense as I inadvertently prepared myself for what was coming.

"Ruby starts whining when we stop walking," Agnes continued. "But no matter where I look, everything seems normal. I don't want to disregard her, so I walk up to try to comfort her, and" - she interrupted herself abruptly, as if gagging - "the smell of rot appears."

"The one you've mentioned in your report?"

Agnes nodded. "Then, the trees around us become dark, and everything turns black. Ruby starts growling, but when I try to catch her, I feel something-"

Her voice broke. Turning around to comfort her, I realised that tears had started falling from her eyes and hurried to push my head into hers. She let out a distressed giggle and grabbed me to keep me against her.

"Take your time," the therapist said.

"I feel something wet on my neck," she continued. "And then I can no longer move." Her body shuddered. "There's a haunter that goes through me and faces me. It's wearing a white coat like a ghost, and it laughs at me. It keeps laughing when he says he's going to gut Ruby."

Agnes's hands clenched upon me. Still trembling, one of them went around my flank to palpate my stomach. I pushed my head into hers without turning around and emitted a quiet but comforting bark.

"Then he claws me." Her speech accelerated and turned to whispers as she continued, "But every time he slashes, it's Ruby who gets wounded, and I'm paralysed so I can't stop him. She yells and she cries and he keeps slashing at me and she cries more and more and I can't do anything. He keeps cutting me until she" - she gulped loudly and babbled a few times before she could get the words out - "until she dies. Generally that's where I wake up, but sometimes the haunter lets me go, all the darkness goes with him, and I'm left alone in the forest with Ruby dead by my feet."

She sniffed loudly, wiping under her eyes with the tips of her fingers. Noticing that, Topa rushed out of the room as the therapist watched her with a confused frown, returning swiftly with a box of tissues that Agnes seized to wipe the rest of her tears.

"I see. This seems to be the result of a traumatic reaction to what happened. The dream should go away with time, but if it doesn't, we will have to consider long-term therapy."

"It will go away with time," Agnes replied.

Although she had made her tone sharp and confident, her voice and eyes wavered as she replied, and the hand that was wrapped around me held me tighter.

"That is very interesting," the therapist continued.

"Why?"

"It's interesting because despite you being attacked, it is Ruby who gets wounded. I think that translates a feeling of guilt. Towards your pokemon."

"I thought that was obvious," Agnes groaned. "Of course it's my fault Ruby has been suffering."

I yelped quietly, turning around to poke her with my forehead.

"No," the psychiatrist said, shaking his head. "Not that way. That is something we will both have to mull over, I think, but I don't want to insist too much on it for now."

"That's fine. I didn't want to talk about it."

Her doctor raised his eyes to peer at her with a disapproving look, blinking a few times as she challenged his gaze with defiance, and scribbled a hasty note.

"Since we're on the topic of dreams, are you willing to talk about the one you had while in a coma? The report I got before our first appointment says you told Doctor Belish you had a dream, but you haven't made mention of it to me."

Agnes shrugged. "Does it matter? I was in a coma. I'm not sure my brain was fully functional."

The psychiatrist frowned. "Whatever does that mean?"

She didn't reply.

"I would like to hear it, please," her therapist insisted.

My human peered at me, then heaved a long sigh. "Okay, fine. I dreamt that I was a cat."

The doctor leaned back on his seat, crossing his legs, and waited.

"That hardly warrants calling your brain not fully functional, does it?" he said after a delay. "Could you elaborate? Describe the dream to me."

Agnes took a deep breath, looking down at her hand. "I thought I'd woken up in the forest at first. I just... sprang up with a deep breath. My belly didn't hurt anymore. But I felt weird. I didn't pay it much attention until I looked around and noticed I couldn't see colours right. That my vision was blurry on the sides. Then I tried to stand, and I couldn't, so I looked down and all I saw was... four orange paws."

My heart skipped a beat. Raising my head from its laying position, I turned around to stare at Agnes. Her eyes were distant, moving rapidly in their sockets as if trying to find something to snap to. Her breath had accelerated, and mine had followed.

"It took me a while to understand these paws were mine," Agnes continued. "My feet were paws. My hands were paws. And then I realised that I was feeling weird because I had fur. And a tail." She brought a hand to her eyes, opening and closing its fingers. "I had turned into a cat, but I wasn't in the forest anymore. I was in some kind of... parking lot? There were lots of cars. There was an enormous hospital nearby. Much bigger than the pokemon centre here. It was called Angelstone hospital."

My breathing had become so fast my chest was painful. I peered at her, eyes wide.

I recognised that name.

"The senses were quite something. The hearing felt like I was in a surveillance van. The whiskers in my face vibrated from everything, it was almost uncomfortable. And the sense of smell... I was a cat for all of about ten days, and I relied on it the most. It was really odd to be able to smell so many things. That's how I made the connection to Ruby's weird reactions and understood what she had been trying to say."

I unwillingly nodded, and my human's eyes briefly returned from the void where they were lost to bless me with their attention. She brought her hand to my head, petting me with an amused chuckle.

"What did you do while you were a cat?" the therapist asked. "Did you go anywhere?"

"No. I just lurked around the hospital. I spent most of my time trying to find safe spots to sleep. But, every day, there was this little girl."

"A little girl?"

"Yes. Dark brown hair, falling to her hips. Had small freckles - I think they were freckles, at least, it's difficult to tell when a person's skin is bright green. But most remarkable were her eyes - she had the most beautiful blue eyes I had ever seen."

My heartbeat accelerated further. I knew that hair. Those freckles. Those eyes.

"Your owner?"

Agnes reflected on the question, then shook her head. "I don't think so. I think I was a stray. But that girl would visit me every morning and every evening before going to the hospital and leaving. She would always come with a little bit of food. I never had to hunt or look for anything, I just waited for her. She would sit in the parking lot, on a bench, and I would join her there." She chuckled. "She wouldn't give me food until I allowed her to pet me. And she talked to me while I ate, and then I often laid on her lap to sleep, but her mom always interrupted us."

The therapist scribbled on his notepad. "What did she say?"

"Talked about her life. I think it helped her. I felt a great deal of sadness from her - and loneliness. Given the way her mom always snatched her away from me, I will wager her mom wasn't someone she could have talked to. Her dad hardly ever accompanied them to the hospital, too, and when he did, he just stood outside. She just needed an ear."

"Anything in particular she said that comes to mind?"

Agnes's eyes returned to the real world to focus on me once again, a small tear appearing in their corners.

"She talked about her sister. Said that she used to be a student. One day, university called her mom. Her sister had been found unconscious in her room after missing a few days of classes. She'd been taken to the hospital and hadn't woken up in almost a year. Doctors had no idea what had happened and whether or not they should even bother keeping her alive."

"How did you react to that?"

Agnes frowned. "I was... empathetic. At least as much as a cat can be. She would cry often, the poor girl, but she always forced herself to stop when she saw her mom coming. I think she loved her sister dearly. I remember her telling me a story of how at first, her sister hated her, but then the little girl convinced her sister to love her by giving her all her birthday gifts. That was probably her happiest memory. She" -Agnes's voice cracked- "she was always so cheerful when talking about her sister, but she always cried when she stopped."

My heart stopped.

"That little girl, did she have a name?"

Agnes nodded, and gave the name that I was expecting.

The therapist frowned. "I don't understand why you were so reluctant to talk about that dream. It feels very common for people in a coma, they often dream of completely different lives, sometimes entire lifespans. They rarely dream about being animals, granted, but given your connection to your pokemon and the circumstances, I don't think it's too much of a surprise."

"Sir, that's because... I don't think it was a dream. It was real."

The therapist slowly waved his head up and down. "Yes, that is common in coma dreams."

Agnes lifted herself on an elbow, her face distorted into a defiant frown. "No, you don't understand. It wasn't a dream. It was real. I think I went to another world."

I stopped listening at that point.

I knew the truth. Agnes was right - what she had experienced wasn't a dream. She had gone somewhere else and taken the body of a cat that existed there. She had seen a lonely little girl who existed there. For a limited time, she had been part of another world.

My world.

Chapter 52

"It was my world, Topa," I said. "My world."

Agnes had fallen asleep on the couch quickly after the therapist left, and I had extracted myself from her suffocating embrace to flee towards the bedroom where I sought the comfort of loneliness.

I was not in the mood for cuddles.

The ninetales had decided not to let me enjoy my panic on my own. Pacing rapidly around the room, tails spread and puffed like a peacock, I skimmed along my improvised circuit, vaulting over the bed and repeating a cycle of anxious treading as Topa sat by the entrance and watched me with a sorrowful frown.

"Ruby, please calm down," she said. "You are in a panic."

"I know. I know."

I momentarily stopped roaming my fretful track to peer at her, ears laid.

"It was my world."

My body shuddered, and I resumed walking, jumping on the bed to tower over Topa, standing on its foot.

"Do you not understand?" I said. "She saw my sister. My sister!" I shook my head in disbelief. "I'm in a coma. I have been for almost a year. So I'm not dead. And my sister is alone."

"Calm down," Topa repeated. "I understand how you feel, believe me, but I do not think that fretting so actively about the situation will do anything about it. You need to clear your mind. Think rationally."

My legs shook as I swooned dangerously close to the edge of the bed, then hopped down and hurried to Topa to sit by her side. She wrapped her tails around me, hiding my body entirely under her protective fluff, and I laid down in this motherly cocoon, hyperventilating and trying to get a hold of myself.

"Okay," I said. "Rationally. That means that there is a way for me to go back. There's a connection of sorts. I can turn back into a human."

"Ruby, if you do not calm down right now, I will hit you with an Ember to calm you down."

My head snapped at her. "You know what? Do it. Let's fight. I need something to... I have too much energy. Let's go to the practice room. Let's fight."

Topa stared at me, eyes wide, and shook her head.

"When you are better, if you are still willing. For now, I want you to keep yourself together. Fighting right now will not do you any good."

"Okay." I nodded - slowly at first, then with needless energy. "There is a way to go back, right? I'm not overthinking this one?"

"Ruby, again, think of this rationally. The only thing we know that your human body and Agnes have in common when they changed worlds was that you were both in comas. It is not too much of an assumption to extrapolate that, whatever causes that, you would need to enter a coma. And we know nothing of the recipients either. Does that cat Agnes turned into ring any bells to you?"

"No. I don't remember seeing any stray cats in the hospital parking lot. But I hadn't been there in a while, I could easily have missed one."

My eyes lowered themselves, involuntarily staring at Topa's tails. She was probably right - if I wanted to go back, I would probably

need to get into a coma, or even risk death as Agnes had, and even then, there was no guarantee I would return to my own body and not take the body of a random animal instead. Even then, if we were drawing similarities with what had happened to me, then we would have to assume that the body I would take would have recently died.

That meant that, if I wanted to go back, I had to die.

"I will be honest with you, Ruby," Topa said.

She liberated me of the fort of her care to stand before me with an insistent gaze, her eyes unable to keep themselves on me as they incessantly lowered themselves immediately after gathering enough strength to pull themselves up.

"I do not want you to go back. I want you to stay."

My heart broke.

"Please consider the situation carefully," she continued, her voice lowering to a despondent whisper. "I understand you have a family in that other world. I understand you miss your sister, even maybe your parents despite your conflict with them. But it has been almost a year since you saw them in that other world. If you were to return after the experiences you have had here, you would certainly not be the same as before. Your relationships with them might change. You are not even sure they want you to continue fighting for your life anymore. Agnes mentioned that your doctors were not sure if they would."

I nodded, my eyes widened as I couldn't do much more than listening.

"You have a family here too. You have me. You have Agnes. We want you to stay and we will never give up on you. What happened to calling me mom?"

"Topa, it doesn't matter what I do. Whether I try to return or not, I will be hurting someone."

She nodded slowly. "Yes. I understand that. All I ask is that you consider both sides before making your choice. I want you not to pursue returning. I cannot promise I will assist you with it if you decide to."

"I won't actively pursue it," I said. "There is too much I don't know about this... process. I won't seek it out, but if the opportunity arises, I will consider it."

Topa stared at me for a second, eyes wide and wavering. Her tails fell to the ground from the arched fan behind her as she turned her head away from me, whispering an "all right" that even my sensitive hearing had trouble picking up, and I impotently watched her drag herself back to the living room, stuck in place by the weight of the dilemma I had been thrown into.

I sat in front of the pillow Topa and I used to practice telekinesis, glaring at it with fury as if my look alone would submit it into flinging itself into the air.

"Once more," the ninetales said. "You are almost there."

"I don't feel like I've made any progress," I whined. "But fine. I'll try."

Once again, my vision turned blue, and I snapped my eyes to my target. I needed to surround the object, not fling my power at it and toss it away, but how was I supposed to control the strands of psychic energy so they were slow enough to envelop my target?

I shook my head. Maybe I was going about it wrong. Maybe it wasn't about slowing the energy down. Maybe it wasn't about strands. Maybe I had everything wrong and I needed to rethink it all.

If I had to envelop the object I wanted to control, why not do it all at once?

My focus shifted to the energy that I was creating. As I allowed it to escape my body in strands through small holes in my aura, I forced

myself to move them to a central point instead of flinging them at my target directly. It formed a ball of glowing azure colour like a particularly bright star, which I then carefully moved towards the pillow between the ninetales and me. Topa nodded approvingly as she watched me through her own psychic-infused eyes, and I enveloped the pillow without issues, then pulled on my power to lift it in the air.

My tails began wagging as I turned to Topa with a proud smile.

"Congratulations," she said. "You have learnt telekinesis. It will take you more practice to be able to do this faster, like it did for Ember, but it should not be too difficult for you."

I didn't smile.

I felt no pride - not even a bit of accomplishment or relief that my task was done. Watching the pillow float, surrounded by a halo of blue that was now disconnected from me, my heart empty as if all my emotions had been transferred to it through the strands of psychic energy, I mourned.

"Thanks," I whispered in a dead tone.

Topa frowned. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I just... this is coming over a month too late. If I had this power before, could I have saved Agnes?"

"I doubt it," Topa replied. The answer made my stomach sink. "You already had this power and used it to save her life. I do not think being able to use telekinesis, even against living targets, would have been of any help. Even if you could have held one of the haunter in place, it would have taken too much of your focus and you would have been attacked by the others. You are just experiencing guilt. Remember what you taught me about it."

I considered the idea for a moment, then nodded. "You're right, but..."

"No buts. Agnes is alive and recovering, and that is thanks to you. Why does that not fill you with pride?"

"Because... because I'm focusing on the negatives again instead of seeing beyond my failure."

Topa grinned comfortingly, and nodded.

Of course, she was right. I focused so much on Agnes's wound and difficulties that I didn't allow myself to face a simple truth: she was still alive. Thanks to me.

"Let us show her your new power once her rehabilitation session is-"

Topa was interrupted by the doorbell. We peered at each other with confused frowns - her physiotherapist was already in her room with her. We weren't expecting anybody.

We rushed to the door, and Topa knocked the interphone off with a paw, then stood aside as I barked into it.

A voice I recognised resonated through the interphone, "Ruby? It's Doctor Belish, I'm with the commissioner. Can you let us in?"

Before I could reply, the door to Agnes's room opened, and she shouted across the apartment, "Ruby, if it's the commissioner, please let him in."

Topa and I exchanged looks again, and I stood on my hind legs to open the door for them. Agnes's therapist, an old woman with ridiculous physical strength, walked into the corridor, carrying her bag with her. She wore a sad frown on her tired face.

"You can go see her," she said with a smile. "I'll let the commissioner in."

Neither of us moved from our positions. Shortly after, there was a knock at the door, and Agnes's physiotherapist opened the door. The commissioner and Doctor Belish, both in full uniforms, stood together behind it, Dante and Ilma sitting behind their trainers. Although my tails began wagging as soon as I noticed the vaporeon, she didn't honour me with so much as a glance and leaned to the side, her eyes focused on the apartment behind me.

"Commissioner," the therapist said. "I will take my leave now."

"Thank you. Where is Agnes?"

"In her room, down the corridor then to the left."

The commissioner nodded with a smile, then turned his head to Topa and me. "Good afternoon," he said. "We've come to talk to Agnes. It's... fairly important. Can you come with us?"

The ninetales glanced at me with a confused frown, and I at Ilma, who simply shot a smile in my direction before returning to her attempt at scanning the room. I turned back to the policeman, nodded with a resolute bark, and hopped off to guide them to Agnes's room.

She laid on her bed in her night gown and compression stockings, panting as she idly browsed her phone. An empty bottle of water had been neglectingly tossed onto her night stand, and her sheets were bundled by the foot of her bed, raising her legs slightly while her torso laid in a perfectly horizontal position, her pillows moved onto the floor.

"Good afternoon, Commissioner, Doctor Belish," she said in a sigh without looking up. She put her phone down and glanced at her legs. "I'm sorry I am so improperly dressed, I didn't expect you so early."

Topa jumped onto the bed and dragged the sheets to cover Agnes's body, and I hopped after her to lay against my trainer. She

endeavoured to scratch the top of my head, behind the swirls of fur between my ears, and I pushed myself into her hand as a response.

"Don't worry about it," the commissioner said, watching Topa work. "How are you feeling?"

Agnes lowered her head for a moment before answering, "Honestly, I'm tired. Rehab isn't progressing and I'm stuck here unable to walk. I can't wait to return to class."

"Maybe we can make arrangements," Doctor Belish said. "You wouldn't be able to join physical classes, obviously, but we can try if you're fine with your schoolmates staring at you and asking you questions. And if you're fine with a wheelchair."

My human let out a frustrated grunt, then a deep sigh. "Wheelchair will have to do until I can walk. It's less humiliating than the walker."

"I'll arrange that," Doctor Belish said. "This isn't what we wanted to see you for, though."

Agnes frowned. "No? I thought you wanted to talk to me about school."

The two policemen glanced at each other with worry in their eyes. Sitting in silence behind them, their pokemon both kept neutral stares as they watched the conversation unfold, and Topa had hopped off the bed to sit by its foot, keeping a careful eye on the vaporeon who seemed oblivious to the watch she was under.

"It's about the forest," the commissioner said.

Agnes froze for a second. Escaping my head, her hand travelled along my back to my side, and her arm wrapped itself around me as she brought me against her in a tight hold. I pushed my head into hers as a response, whimpering quietly, and she gave me a quick kiss before raising her other hand to resume petting me.

Her voice wavered. "Tell me."

"We've been conducting extensive searches of the area you were rescued in," the commissioner said. "The army's been involved. But we haven't found anything. Ruby knows something that she can't communicate to us, so we would like to ask for permission to borrow her-"

"I'm coming," Agnes interrupted.

Her brow was furrowed in an expression between fury and vexation. The commissioner blinked, then exchanged concerned gazes with Doctor Belish who shook his head.

"You're not in a state in which you can-"

"I'm coming," she repeated. "I will not let Ruby go in there alone. I will not endanger her even for the sake of the investigation. If the forest is on lockdown and the army is involved, then there is no risk to anyone anymore, and you can wait until I can walk again."

"That would give plenty of time for the killers to move away. If they're impossible to track down, they might have the means to flee without us catching them."

"I don't care. I will not risk Ruby."

Her right hand tightened her hold of me, and her left laid itself against her belly, fingers clenched into agonizing claws. Tears fell from her eyes as she challenged the gazes of her superiors who stared back in worry and confusion.

Dante took a step forward and barked. As everyone turned to him, he bent his front legs into an animal curtsy.

"Are you sure?" the commissioner asked. The absol barked again with confidence, and his trainer turned to his friend. "Would it work?"

"I think so," Doctor Belish said. "We'll need additional straps for her legs, I wager, but it should."

"What are you talking about?" Agnes asked.

"There might be a way for you to come with us without hindering progress and while keeping you relatively safe. How comfortable would you feel riding a pokemon?"

"I have no issues with that. I know how to ride, my parents have taken me to ranches quite a few times."

Dante barked again and walked forward right up to Agnes's bed. As I tensed up by her side, Agnes frowned in confusion, and the absol curtsied again.

The commissioner smiled. "Then you can ride Dante."

Agnes's brow furrowed further, and she stared at the pokemon still curtseying to her. "How? He's not-"

"I have a saddle for him," the commissioner said. "Back when I was in the army, I made a name for myself for riding him while we fought. That came in very handy during the Ruize war and I led a lot of charges" -he interrupted himself, glancing at Ilma with a sorry frown- "without ever being wounded. You will be safe on his back, especially if you have Ruby with you."

Topa stood and barked with energy.

"Can Topa also come, then?" Agnes asked.

"Absolutely," the commissioner said. "The more, the better. Plus, she might know the move that Ruby mentioned caused fire-type pokemon specifically to be targetted."

I nodded frantically.

"It is done. I'll have the saddle modified so you can be strapped to it despite your lower body being still in recovery. We will return to the forest on Monday, so you have this weekend to prepare." The commissioner turned to me. "Ruby, I would appreciate if you could start learning the move you mentioned."

I barked with confidence.

"Do you feel comfortable handling a rifle?" Doctor Belish asked.

"Shouldn't be a problem. I'm not Derek, but I can land a shot on my target if need be. I did train a lot for SWAT" -she peered at her legs hidden by the sheets of her bed and let out a weary sigh- "I just hope it won't be."

"Hopefully not. Very well, then. I suggest you and your pokemon take as much rest as you can this weekend. A live raid is very different from training. The risk is real."

"Sir, I was gutted by a pokemon. I think I have a good understanding of risk."

Doctor Belish chuckled incredulously. "Unfortunately so."

"Since you're coming with us, I think I will give you the task to co-command the unit," the commissioner said. "Given your importance and... experience with this investigation, you'll be given a temporary rank of second lieutenant. The men will have their own commanding officer, and you will be there to act as his advisor, but they will be instructed to obey you as their second-in-command. If their commanding officer is incapacitated, you will take over."

"Understood."

The two policemen saluted, and Agnes returned the gesture from her laying position on the bed. As Dante stood and returned to his trainer, Ilma took a step forward and smiled to Topa.

"I suppose this will be my chance to measure your strength, then. I look forward to working with you."

"I hope not," Topa replied. "I pray there will be no need for such comparisons. And I fear I may disappoint you."

"You might just surprise yourself. Once this is all over, I still insist I want to have a proper sparring duel. See you on Monday, then."

Topa lowered her head in a respectful salute. Ilma turned to me with an even brighter smile, then turned around as her trainer left the room.

When the door to her apartment closed, Agnes tightened her hold of me even further and let out a trembling sigh. I chirped at her, pushing my head into hers, and she gave me a few pets. Topa jumped on the bed, barking inquisitively, and received a few pets as well.

"I'm okay, you two," Agnes said with a broken smile. "But I can't let them take you and put you in a dangerous situation. Plus, I want to catch the people who did this to us myself. Are you two okay with my decision?"

Topa and I nodded simultaneously.

"Even though we know it's dangerous and you might get wounded?"

We both barked with confidence, tails wagging slowly. Agnes let out a deep sigh and let go of me, turning in bed to lay on her back. Her traits momentarily deformed by pain, she took a deep breath, looking up at the ceiling.

"I don't deserve to lead a unit," she whispered. "Or wield a rifle. They're putting far too much faith in me. The first time I went to the forest, I was nearly killed. I should have died, even, were it not-"

She interrupted herself, shaking her head with a distraught sigh as Topa and I exchanged concerned gazes.

"You'll be the ones doing everything again," she said, turning to us with a blank stare. "I'll be sitting on that absol, shouting at men who probably won't want to obey me, while you'll be on the front line taking risks. Your powers will make or break that mission. Oh, Topa, do you know what move Ruby was talking about?" The ninetales nodded. "Please start teaching her. We might need it for future raids if this one is unsuccessful."

Topa nodded again. I should have been excited that she was willing to finally teach me Will-O-Wisp, but I felt empty. It wasn't that she had been ordered to do so by Agnes - she had said before that she was willing to teach me - but the circumstances surrounding my learning the move were heartbreaking.

And Agnes was heartbroken.

My heart ached as she continued, her head and shoulders dropping, and her gaze never moving away from the ceiling. "I am so useless. Not a surprise the commissioner wanted to go without me, I will just be a dead weight. It's evident that if something happens, they won't let you two fight, or they wouldn't have had problems with me coming with you. They plan on sheltering you. And I'm useless. How I wish I had powers too, then maybe I could do something." She turned her head to Topa and me, tears brightening her cheeks. "You have no idea how much I envy you. I wish I were a pokemon."

As Topa whined and laid on Agnes's legs, I let out a scolding bark, extracting myself from her grip to rub my head against hers. She chuckled - then winced in pain - and raised her arms to seize me again, but didn't push me away from her. I laid on her upper torso, head between her neck and shoulder, and sighed as well.

"Don't worry," she whispered. "It's this wound starting to get to me. I'm okay. We'll go to the forest on Monday, capture the killers, and after that, I'll shift my studies to being a detective. You can still be with me - your powers would be extremely useful for a detective, even." She chuckled gently and endeavoured to scratch me behind the ear. "You two work on the move tomorrow, and I'll plan for a

possible fight with haunter, okay? We can do this. I'm going to prove to them that I can be useful, even crippled."

Topa barked. She and I stood at the same time, and as I walked over my trainer to lay on her side, the ninetales walked to her to lay on her other side, our heads and one paw each on her torso. She grunted as she put her hands on our heads and petted us.

"I love you both," she whispered. "I don't think I could have kept going without you. Now let's call Rakuen, get some food, and get ready. This is going to be the last carefree weekend we get to enjoy."

Chapter 53

A policeman pushed Agnes's wheelchair out of the police van that took us to the edge of the forest, and Topa and I jumped after her.

The trees stood in front of us, unwavering in their horrifying confidence, and bringing a smell of grass and leaves that mocked us with its strength. Rising above the horizon to the east, the sun shone undisturbed upon us in its blue cover, showering us with a powerful heat that would have been uncomfortable to me were my fur not immune to these assaults.

Gathered in two equal groups near a police van were eight policemen in full armoured uniform, hiding their faces under a black cloth that showed only their eyes through and wearing thick helmets strapped under their chins. They had the utility belts I had seen before on Agnes's uniform, with a small pistol secured in their holsters, as well as a short rifle of a strangely rectangular shape with only a scope protruding out of them and two holes for the hand and trigger. Each team was accompanied with three poochyena and one electrike, who wore slabs of a black material tied together with a cloth tightly woven upon their bodies, their tails, limbs, and heads alone escaping the confines of their armours.

Three other policemen in full gear stood apart from them, accompanied by a flareon, an espeon, and a sandslash. None of the three pokemon wore any armour.

My tails wagged with force as they and their trainers turned to us.

"Ruby!" Pico called, his tail also wagging.

"Agnes?" Derek said with a hint of surprise in his voice.

Although the flareon ran to us, his human walking calmly behind him, Pride and his trainer only gratified us with a quick nod as a greeting,

and the last policeman didn't even glance towards us.

Pico endeavoured to sniff my head, poking me regularly with his wet muzzle.

"I'm so happy to see you!" he said. "Why are you here? Are you okay?"

Derek finally reached Agnes and stood before her with a wavering mouth. I sat down by the wheelchair, watching him give my human a tight hug - which she gladly returned - and the two of them engaged in a conversation I didn't bother listening to.

"I'm okay, Pico, thank you," I said, turning back to the flareon. "I'm here to participate in the... operation?"

His brow furrowed as he looked me over. "Are you sure?" he asked. "It's going to be dangerous. Derek and I will be commanding our unit, I can't focus on protecting you."

"That's fine. I have Topa with me."

Only then did Pico finally leer at the ninetales. His tail froze for a second, then resumed wagging with even more force.

"A ninetales," he whispered, muzzle ajar. "I... you're beautiful."

"Thank you," Topa said. "I do return the compliment."

Derek cleared his throat, looking at his pokemon with an amused smile. Pico glanced at him, then gasped, and sat in front of Topa, lowering his head in a deferent bow.

"My name is Pico," he said. "I'm one of Ruby's classmates and I've been assigned to watch over her in school."

"I have heard of you," Topa replied. "Thank you for watching over her, then. My name is Topa."

"I've also heard of you. I'm happy we get to meet."

His wagging tails were proof of that, although there was something in the way he stared at Topa that made me uncomfortable. The ninetales forced a shy smile and nodded, then took a step back to hide behind Agnes's wheelchair.

"So this is your sister's ninetales, uh?" Derek said. Topa frowned in his direction, and lowered her head to greet him. "Hello! I've never seen a ninetales in person before. They're even prettier than I imagined."

"She's my ninetales now," Agnes said with a sigh. "She's participating in the operation as well."

My cheeks became warm. Standing from my position, I walked over to Derek, barking with anger until he finally looked at me.

"Hello, Ruby," he said. "I hope you're doing okay."

I nodded with enthusiasm.

"Where's your rifle?" Agnes asked, pointing to Derek's weapon.

It was the same rectangular rifle as the other policemen.

"Oh, a sniper rifle wouldn't do us any good here," he replied with a smile. "We're going to be fighting in narrow spaces, so SMGs are much better. About that, we have one for you; and we need to get you kitted up before the commissioner comes. But first, let me introduce you to the other sergeant."

He whistled loudly, grabbing the attention of the policeman with the sandslash, and both walked over to us.

I blinked as they saluted.

"Sergeant Anish," he said. "I heard you would be our second-in-command."

"At ease," Agnes said with a tired sigh. "Temporarily, yes. I hope it's not a problem."

"Absolutely not! It's an honour to participate in an operation with you. You and your pokemon have quite the reputation, even outside of your school. The commissioner and Colonel Belish both hold you in the highest esteem."

"Yes, so I've heard."

The man's stare lingered on Agnes's wheelchair, and he frowned with a confused look as I looked over the two policemen standing before us.

So Derek was a sergeant. So was this Anish one. Agnes was, at least temporarily, a second lieutenant. Then who was first lieutenant? And why was Belish, a colonel, not commanding the group?

"It's going to feel weird having you so close to me in rank," Sean said as he approached.

"Don't worry, things will go back to normal once this is over."

The man chuckled. "Unless you get promoted after this! I honestly wouldn't mind. You're pretty awesome, you would definitely deserve it." His expression turned sour when he noticed the gloomy look on Agnes's face. "All right, let's get you geared up."

Topa and I frowned in his direction as he pushed Agnes's wheelchair towards the vans his men waited by, but Pride tapped the ground to catch our attention.

"Good morning, Ruby," he said. He bowed shortly to the ninetales. "You as well, Topa. I am honoured to finally meet you."

"Good morning," I replied as Topa bowed in response. "So you're a lieutenant?"

"Yes. I have to say, I'm relieved to see you unharmed. I'd heard from Derek's superiors that you had been captured by the men responsible for the attacks."

"I... was helped out," I replied after a moment of hesitation. "By a wild pokemon I befriended a while ago."

Pride nodded proudly. "Having connections is important. Have you been briefed on what's happening today?"

"I listened when the commissioner asked Agnes for permission to borrow me for the mission, so... kind of. I have no idea what to expect."

"Follow orders and keep the humans safe. Normally, as a Fire-type pokemon, you would be first line in front of me, but you will be protected here. The commissioner said Topa had a move that was crucial for our mission, and you might know it as well. So our briefing went something like: keep the vulpix and the ninetales safe at all costs and capture whatever and whomever you come across."

"Are we really going to come across anyone?"

"That would be ideal."

My eyes fled towards Topa as I let out a deep sigh, my tails shuddering behind me. She smiled gently, covering me with her long tails, and peered up as a car pulled up behind us.

Doctor Belish and the commissioner came out, also wearing their full armour, and their pokemon behind them - the commissioner's talonflame being notably absent. Although Dante wore nothing, Ilma wore a very peculiar helmet that covered the left side of her head including her left fin, with a black metallic crest going over her head and dragging onto her spine. Her body armour was bulkier than the one I had seen on the poochyena, particularly the left side, and plates of articulated metal covered her four limbs, leaving only her tail free of protection. Her natural aura combined with the dark

armour and helmet gave her a terrifying look that made me tremble as she turned her head to me.

She barked towards Belish, who peeked at me and nodded to her, and ran in my direction. I couldn't repress a whimper when she stood before me.

"Good morning," she said with a bright smile that contrasted bizarrely with her terrifying look. "Don't be scared, this is just armour. Where is Agnes?"

"Being kitted up by the van," I whispered.

"Ah, wonderful. Let me brief you and Topa quickly, then."

Topa stepped forward, looking at the vaporeon with a neutral stare. "Apologies for the interruption, but does Ruby not get armour?"

"No, Fire-type pokemon don't have any. We've found that their powers melt it rapidly, and it's a burden more than anything. You two will be protected by Pride and Dante."

"What about you?" I asked.

"Front line, together with Pico. Let me brief you: your roles, Ruby and Topa, will be to use whatever move it is that will help us - if you know it, Ruby, otherwise you will be helping protect Agnes and Topa. Your focus should be on that fully. Pride will be in second line using his powers to shield us, I will be using mine to disable any enemies we may come across, and Pico is our main firepower. Third line will be the two electrike, the poochyena will form a circle around us, and the sandslash will be at the back. Agnes and Dante will be in the very centre with you two by her sides, and the rest of the humans will be around us with their pokemon. Got it?"

Topa nodded confidently, but I stumbled on my words as I replied, "Vaguely."

"Good enough," Ilma said with an amused chuckle. "The goal of the mission is to locate one of the laboratories Agnes mentioned, if there is any in the forest, investigate it, and capture one of the people involved if possible. Elimination is acceptable if there is no alternative."

My heart dropped. Before I could say anything, one of the policemen in armour walked to us and cleared his throat.

"We're all ready to go," he said.

Ilma nodded with a short bark. The man swivelled on his toes and we followed after him towards the group of armed humans. Although my heart began beating faster, I felt like it had disappeared from my chest, and I looked up at the menacing treeline with a shiver in my gaze.

Agnes had been mounted on Dante, on a saddle with a unique elongated shape, leaning forward and resting onto it. Thick straps attached her legs to the side of the pokemon in a bent shape, and went over her back to pull her onto the saddle that supported her. She had been given armour like the rest of the men, and one of those weird rifles, which she held over Dante's neck close to her head.

"Are you two ready?" she said as Topa and I approached. "Have you been briefed?" We both nodded - although my head movement was shaky and uncertain. "Wonderful. Ruby, come here to my right, Topa on the left."

Slipping a balaclava and a helmet on, Sean adjusted the straps of his rifle and whistled loudly, catching the attention of all the soldiers present - including Doctor Belish and the commissioner. He spoke in a powerful composed voice that I wouldn't have expected of him, Pride sitting proudly by his side and scanning the group with defiant eyes.

"All right everyone, listen up. This is mostly reckon, I don't expect to be coming across anyone yet, but stay on your guard and stay close to one another. We're going to hurry through the first part of the day to reach the spot Second Lieutenant Trokair was attacked in. From there, we'll take a short break, and proceed into the Gloss Forest. She will be my second-in-command and advisor for this mission, so I expect you to obey her as if she were me. Her pokemon will be using a specific move that will allow us to bypass the powers used by haunter, so pay close attention to what they do. If we come across any hostiles, try to capture them - if you can't, engage and neutralise. If we find any laboratories, we'll scout and see what we can find inside. If we don't, we'll organise more raids until we find one or capture one of the men involved. For now, let's go and see what we come across. Get in formation and move."

The commissioner nodded in approval towards Sean, whose focused gaze was stuck on his unit. Humans and pokemon ran to their assigned positions according to the formation explained to us by Ilma, with her, Pico, and Pride, together with their trainers standing slightly behind them, forming a three-man point. The commissioner stood to Agnes's right, with me between the two, and our small circle came to a shy point with the sandslash behind us. We stood in position for a second, Sean looking back as if to inspect us.

My heart dropped when he gave the order to move.

We progressed rapidly for several hours, hurrying through the forest along the path that Agnes had taken and following her instructions, never stopping to rest or inspect our surroundings. I waddled along, struggling to keep up with the fast pace of all these adult humans and pokemon, my ears and nose peeled for anything that would be different from what I remembered of the first trip, and Topa ran together with us on the other side of the giant absol compared to me, her long tails and mane floating beautifully as she moved with such grace she seemed to be hovering above the ground. Agnes held her rifle tight against her chest, her brow furrowed in an expression of

focus I had never seen on her, and her hands shivering upon her weapon. Despite being seated and not having to move, she breathed as heavily as the other humans.

"We're here," she announced with a trembling voice.

The group looked around, the furrows of their brows making their eyes nearly invisible under their dark face covers.

"Are you sure?" Sean asked, looking around. "How can you tell?"

Her breath quickened when she replied in a shudder, "I can feel it."

My chest became painful as I scanned the area, a familiar feeling of dread pinching my stomach and quickening my breaths. Topa's head also moved rapidly as she inspected the place.

"I'm not seeing the blood patch," the commissioner said. "We should see it from where we rescued you."

"Not if they hid it," Agnes whispered. "Ruby, Topa, light us up."

The group turned to us as we turned to each other. The ninetales nodded, and I in return.

I cast my mind back to the day before and retraced the steps that Topa had outlined. Energies that I had then learnt to manipulate surged through my body, filling me with a now familiar excitement, and a stream of fire mixed with drops of all three parts of the psychic triangle travelled through my eyes, swirling into the air to form a fireball of an otherworldly mauve colour.

Although I had only managed to create one wisp, Topa had made six, and they floated restlessly around our heads, emanating gentle lights through the intense deep purple auras that surrounded them. A faint sound of rustling leaves, accompanied with the overwhelming scent of dirt, came to us as the wisps came into existence.

There was a short silence. Pride and Ilma all stared at me with a mix of surprise and pride in their eyes, but Pico's gaze lingered with intense envy on Topa, who sat down and looked up at Agnes.

"Why Will-O-Wisp?" the commissioner asked.

"Let me show you," she said. She glanced at me and pointed to a tight group of trees to our front and our right. "Ruby, there."

My body shuddered as I ordered my wisp to move, and the floating fire slowly made its way towards the trees, close to the ground. The dirt by their roots soon took a deep crimson colour and brought us a scent of blood so strong that it made me cough.

"Will-O-Wisp undoes the haunters' powers," Agnes whispered, transfixed on the puddle of her own blood. "I don't know why."

"How did you know?" Belish asked.

"Ruby let me know. I don't know where she learnt it herself. I think the lights of the Glossy Hills are just pokemon using Will-O-Wisp to protect themselves against the hunter. There's nothing supernatural in this."

The commissioner shook his head with a confused expression. "Things don't add up, though. Agnes, you said that these men target Fire-type pokemon because of their powers, right? Because of a specific move?"

"That's what I understood, yes."

"Then that move is Will-O-Wisp, because it undoes the haunters' powers and puts them at risk of being found. But Fire-type pokemon can't all learn Will-O-Wisp. It is an extremely exclusive move - all pokemon that can learn it are Ghost-type, with the exception of vulpix and fennekin. So why target and kill houndour? It can't learn that move."

Agnes frowned, lowering her head and staring at the back of the absol she was mounted on.

"I'm sorry," she said after a delay. "I was only formulating hypotheses, I did not mean to pretend I knew the truth."

"Don't apologise," the commissioner replied with a smile. "Your theory is the first real break we've ever had in this investigation. Whether or not you were right, you were tremendously helpful - and you and your pokemon are essential to this operation even right now. You can be proud of yourself."

"Can I?"

My human's voice trailed off as her frown turned despondent, and she looked away with a weary sigh, her gaze escaping towards the blood-soaked dirt and the trees behind it. She intently stared in their direction in complete silence, ignoring even my quiet barks.

Ilma approached me as the military men sat where they were, the purple halo from the wisps shrouding them in a protective glow.

"You are handling this remarkably well," she said. "And look at you already learning more moves."

"I'm not scared," I replied with confidence. "I'm not angry either. I'm just... I don't know. I can reflect on my emotions later. I have to protect Agnes."

"Very impressive," Ilma whispered with an approving nod. "You've grown a lot to be able to distance yourself from your emotions for the sake of the operation."

"I don't care about the operation," I growled. "I want to keep Agnes safe."

Ilma's head jolted back slightly, and she chuckled with amusement. She didn't comment more and only granted Topa a deep bow before

withdrawing back to her position by Belish's side.

Agnes still stared at the trees where she had been nearly killed when Sean stood.

"All right, everyone," he said in a commanding voice. "Time to go. We're going into hostile territory now. Keep your wits about you and stay close to the wisps." He then turned to me. "Ruby, you'll take the lead from here. Stay behind our front line and give directions. Let's retrace your steps."

Although my trainer glared at Sean with murderous eyes, I nodded with a short bark, and hurried forward to place myself in front of Pride and behind the other two evolved eevee, and once our formation was set, Sean gave the order to advance.

The forest turned unnaturally dark as soon as we crossed the dirt path that bordered the trees of the Gloss Forest. Without the wisps providing us with comforting lighting, even my eyes would have trouble seeing anything - which contrasted wildly with what I remembered of the short time I spent in this forest, running after the eevee who had rescued me.

There were no scents on the ground that I could track, but I had little trouble tracing my path back. Although I didn't recognise anything, the forest felt strangely familiar to me, almost disturbingly so - and I barked quietly when the group reached the spot where I had been liberated.

Sean raised his right fist, causing the squad to stop, and I stepped forward between the two evolved pokemon that protected me, scanning the area with the wisp I controlled. I did recognise the trees and the soil, and could still picture the unconscious humans and haunter laying on the ground, where the eevee was when I woke up, where we came from - but I had no idea where to go from there.

My eyes snapped to a spot among the trees, almost perfectly in line with the path we had been taking, as if my entire body were drawn to

it, and I snarled in its direction.

"What is it?" Ilma asked. "Did you see something?"

"No, I... I know where we are, but I'm not sure where to go. My gut tells me it's over there."

The vaporeon frowned in my direction, then where I so intently faced.

She nodded. "Yes, I feel the same."

"What is it?" Sean asked.

"I'm not sure," Agnes said. "Ruby wants us to go there, right?" I nodded with energy. "I don't know why she stopped, but we should proceed. It makes sense; it follows the path we were taking. There's got to be something over there."

"All right. Let's move."

"Look for trapdoors," I whispered. "The labs are underground."

I hurried back to my position between the three evolved pokemon, their eyes following me as I looked forward and took a deep breath. The wisps around us lowered themselves in the air, the ground taking on intense mauve hues where it reflected the gentle light that came from our powers, and noises of cloth and metal rang through my ears as we resumed our march.

Hearts thumped thunderously with the heavy puffs of weary breaths that accompanied the stomping of feet on the dry ground. The raised ears of the pokemon forming a protective circle around the humans, combined with their superior visions assisted by the floating wisps, were all the caution we could display, and in spite of our unmoving formation and the potentially dangerous situation we were in, we moved at a carefully rapid pace. A large part of my focus was on the one wisp I had managed to summon and control, and the rest was

stuck in the unknown of trying to identify the feeling that had been nagging me since we had stepped foot into the Gloss Forest.

Even with Topa and my powers shrouding us in their truthful auras, the forest was eerily silent. The ground smelled of little more than the dirt it was made of - some vaguely animal scents that I didn't recognise hid under the layers of soil and decaying leaves, and a few other unknown odours I knew were pokemon overpowered them. The only sounds I could hear were the steps, breaths, and hearts of my group - and I had no doubts that the haunter that were possibly surrounding us waiting for a chance to ambush could hear us just as well.

Surprisingly, there were no ambushes, or even any signs of life except us, and we progressed in an oppressing silence through the frightening forest for what felt like several hours - it was difficult to tell time when no sunlight whatsoever could reach the ground. Yet, my heart was steady, and my breath confident, as I walked with pride in the middle of my evolved escort as if I belonged among them.

"Over there," Agnes said as we waded through more of the same trees.

The group stopped.

"I saw something shine."

Laying on Dante's saddle, she shouldered her rifle, pointing it to our left. The group moved to a tighter formation as I moved my wisp there, my entire body shuddering in terror.

Agnes was right. Moving closer to the ground, the wisp's light reflected violently back at us upon a smooth sheet of a silvery metal. A box of the material hardly sprouted from the ground, its front at a slight angle growing up as it expanded away from us. A small dent within the surface marked the shape of a trapdoor with no visible handle.

The group remained silent for a moment, all ears turned to the entrance. No sounds escaped it, or smells - except a strong smell of steel and blood.

"Pride," Sean whispered. "Get us in. Everyone, get ready."

Metallic noises erupted from rifles being cocked as the espeon walked towards the trapdoor. His eyes turned cerulean, as did the giant slab of metal; and shortly after, it slowly flipped open, and we dove into a darkness of unknown dangers.

Chapter 54

The trapdoor led to a long corridor going down in a gentle slope similar to those that could be found in underground parking lots. Our large group had to huddle closer together to sneak through the square entrance, but Agnes, mounted on the giant absol, didn't even have to lean forward and could comfortably ride through without risk of touching the ceiling. Topa unsummoned most of her wisps except two - one at the back of the group, and one at the centre, while mine led us, illuminating the corridor in a comforting light.

The smooth concrete of the floor felt cold to my paws as I carefully proceeded forward, hidden between the three evolved pokemon closely grouped together to protect me. The purple light from my wisp dimmed slightly as it bounced on the light grey floor and walls and vanished into the pitch black ceiling, revealing regularly spaced metallic circles that held small domes of glass up and hid inactive lamps, while our paws and feet raised swirling clouds of thin dust and echoed loudly through the oppressive silence of the tunnel, bringing a host of unknown scents to me - mostly human.

We walked for what felt like several minutes, the thumping of boots on the solid ground sounding like thunder to my sensitive ears, until we reached a double flap door, closed upon what I could only guess was another corridor.

Sean raised his fist - the group stopping as a response - and nodded towards Pride, his furrowed brow hiding what little I could see of his eyes through his balaclava. The espeon nodded as well, an expression of serious focus in his eyes that sent a terrified shiver through my spine into my tails, and turned to the door. His eyes turned cerulean for a brief moment, but nothing happened.

Two of the policemen from the middle of our formation moved forward, hiding behind the corners of the door and pointing their rifles towards it, as Dante stepped to the side and Pico enveloped me with

his body. The Sandlash approached, his trainer in tow, and nodded towards Sean.

The lieutenant nodded sternly, and the doors burst open. The two policemen on the side, followed by Pride, Ilma, the Sandlash, and their trainers, rushed into the room, rifles at the ready.

"Wait here," Pico whispered. "They're inspecting the room first. Topa, can you send a few wisps their way?"

The ninetales nodded, summoning three more wisps, and sent them into the room as the rest of us waited anxiously by the doors.

Finally, after a few seconds, a voice came from inside, "Clear."

"Stay sharp," Pico said. "You never know."

"I'm aware, believe me."

A deep sigh escaped me as my thoughts returned to the trip I had taken with Agnes to strengthen our bond - a nearly fatal trip for her.

"Ruby, come here and stay close," my human said. "Topa, you too. Let's see what this is all about."

Dante glanced towards me with a gentle smile as he approached, the ninetales tailing him and Agnes staring at the door with a wavering gaze. Two policemen opened the doors for us, and we stepped into the next room.

The unpolished dusty stone floor turned into a carefully maintained parquet of a strangely dark shade as we stepped into a surprisingly small room. The short walls stood around us, covered in wooden patterns of a lighter colour than the floor and split into regularly built rectangles. They supported a dome ceiling, a single lamp covered by a dark grey hood falling from its centre and poorly illuminating its surroundings. Besides the patterned wall and ceiling lamp, there was not much verticality to this room, making it seem a lot taller than I

knew it was - the few pieces of furniture, old-looking cupboards of low height and decorated only by the golden handles of their closed drawers, extended the dark colour of the floor slightly as if to offer a feeble challenge to the light walls that stood out in the midst of the emptiness we found ourselves in. Dark brown carpets failed to merge into the wooden floor they protected from the clawing assaults of the feet of the furniture.

The room felt disturbingly familiar to me.

"Did we get the wrong place?" the commissioner whispered as he walked up to us. "This looks like it's been abandoned for years."

Agnes shook her head and liberated her nose from the cloth that burdened it, then tilted herself back with a deep breath.

"No," she said as the commissioner turned to her with a confused frown. "Can you smell this? The air is clean. It's warm. If this were abandoned, we would be smelling dust and it would be cold."

"But there was dust in that tunnel."

"It probably hasn't been used in some time. There has to be another way in or out. They're running an illegal operation that involves murdering pokemon and trying to murder people. They have to be hiding well. This room is probably just a giant red herring."

Her superior lowered his head thoughtfully for a second, then peered into the red herring. "You might be right. Then we need to find where they actually conduct their experiments. Maybe this particular room isn't a lab."

A violent feeling of displeasure shook me, causing my tails to shudder with impatient frustration. Next to me, perched on the giant absol, Agnes shook her head with the same displeasure and grunted with the same frustration, glaring angrily at her superior.

"No," she growled. "This is a lab. There's a hidden room somewhere. We just have to find it. Ruby, come with me. Dante, can you take me to that wall?"

She pointed to our left. The absol glanced at his trainer with a confused frown, and obeyed my human's order when the commissioner nodded repeatedly with a tired sigh.

The commissioner joined us and we inspected the closest cabinet first, with the help of the gentle light from my wisp. Behind us, Sean gave orders to his team to mimic us and inspect the walls and floor for secret doors. Topa created as many wisps as she could, each following a pair of people, and the entire squad was soon scrutinizing the room.

It took only a couple minutes before someone shouted. It was Sean, who had grouped with Doctor Belish. The wisp accompanying them had unveiled a wooden door hidden behind a series of short cabinets, on the other end of the room.

"Topa, would you mind helping me with this?" Pride asked.

"Topa, can you help move the cabinets?" Agnes said.

The ninetales hurried towards the espeon as the squad gathered around them. The furniture was swiftly moved out of the way in an eerie silence, Pride's and Topa's eyes glowing blue and merging bizarrely with the lights of the wisps that had been gathered around us. Two policemen stayed by the door, a wisp above, and weapons at the ready.

I brought my wisp closer to this new door and leaned forward, sniffing it intently. Numerous strong scents of humans covered it, as well as other unpleasant smells that I didn't recognise and made me cough gently, but I couldn't smell any pokemon on the door or on the floor immediately around it.

I could, however, smell blood.

"Any signs of activity?" Sean asked, looking at me.

I shook my head.

"This door is cold," one of the policemen whispered.

"Sounds like we've found our lab," Doctor Belish said in a sigh.

"Get ready to breach," Sean said. "On my signal."

Dante nudged me with his muzzle to tell me to follow him. The group created a small corridor that led directly to the door, occupied only by Pride and Ilma on the front line and Pico behind them. Two policemen stood next to the door, pointing their rifles towards it, and the espeon's eyes became cerulean again.

Frowning in confusion, I activated my own psychic powers and stared at him. An enormous blue barrier in a slightly concave shape had been erected in front of the group of evolved eevee, covering several times the size of the door and curving to protect their sides.

"Go," Sean said.

The policeman on the left leaned forward and put his hand on the handle, then flung the door open. The barrier Pride had created moved forwards immediately, tailed by the two armed men and Ilma, who disappeared into the room. Pride and Pico, together with their trainers, rushed in next, and half of the other policemen went after them.

"The room is empty," Derek's voice called from inside. "But..."

"This isn't right," Doctor Belish said. "This isn't right at all."

The commissioner and Agnes exchanged concerned looks, and walked into the laboratory, Topa and I in tow.

The room, much larger than the decoy before it, was so cold that I shivered as soon as I stepped in it. Dirtied by the haphazardly

washed remnants of muddy footprints and frost forming a snow-like layer, a linoleum of a light grey shade replaced the parquet of the decoy room before and was covered with many pieces of white furniture that protruded from it like the trees of the forest sprouted from the dirt under them. The tables organised in rows of two were split in countless cupboards and drawers that sported a thin line of azure and covered in numerous plastic containers in the shapes of bottles or small jugs, closed by colourful caps and bearing all sorts of yellow and black warning labels. Glass cages selfishly took most of the available space on each row of two tables - some were horizontally split and served as shelves, but others were completely enclosed, opened only by four maws vomiting yellow latex gloves into their own insides. The ceiling descended above them and swallowed their top into giant ventilation chimneys, and the parts above the corridors formed by the islands of furniture stood high above them, decorated by series of white squares and occasional grids supported by a mesh of a dark grey material I could not identify from my position.

The walls of the room, white like the furniture they sheltered, had neither windows nor doors; they were instead littered by closed cupboards that stretched high towards the ceiling, except for one long desk on the wall opposite to the entrance burdened by a couple of turned off computers, a still half-full coffee machine, and a few pens scattered on it.

"Look at this," Doctor Belish said.

He stood by the wall to our left. Instead of the cupboards or desk that hid the other walls, this one had a deep alcove that formed a narrow room illuminated by neons rather than the strong incandescent bulbs that poured light into the room. Five long glass tubes were spread in a zigzag pattern in it, connecting its floor to its ceiling, and covered in a thick frost that hid their contents. A freezing fog escaped the alcove and fell onto the floor of the room.

"Is this a biology lab?" the commissioner asked. "Who set this up? Do our scientists know of this location?"

"I hope not," Belish said. "It would mean they are involved in whatever this is." He let out a deep sigh, and looked up at the glass tubes. "I think these are cryogenic freezers. If they are, I hope I'm wrong about what's inside."

"Maybe it's best not to look inside yet, then," the commissioner said. "Are the computers working?"

"Probably disconnected," one of the policemen said. "They won't turn on."

"Get inside and get us the hard drives."

"Yes, sir."

Sean walked towards his superior, shaking his head. "Why is this place empty? It was clearly used recently, there's mud on the floor, and they bothered trying to throw us off with that room before."

They had probably left in a hurry after being attacked by the eevee, using the haunter to cover their tracks but not having the time to hide incriminating information. That had to have happened very shortly after they failed to kill Agnes - they had expected police to be on their trails much faster than it had actually been.

"They probably panicked," Agnes said. "After they tried to kill me and I was rescued, they abandoned the place in a hurry and didn't bother taking their computers with them. I bet they didn't think we would be able to pierce the haunter's powers. Now it's biting them back."

"That makes no sense," the commissioner said. "Had they panicked, the computers would be the first thing they would have taken. They probably wouldn't even have bothered setting up their decoys at all. Why abandon all their information? The place still has electricity, even. What is going on?"

"Let's capitalise on their mistake, sir," Sean intervened. "This is our chance to gather intel. If they abandoned the place, they won't know

we recovered it. And if they haven't, we can set up a trap for them."

"Sir," a policeman said. "I found something."

The man and his electrike approached and handed the commissioner a crumpled piece of paper. The officer frowned and seized it, then unfolded it as best he could, his eyes carefully scrutinizing it. I moved a wisp towards him, in the event that the ink used on the paper was invisible, and he gave me a grateful nod with a large smile.

"Subject acquired," he read. "Transporting back to closest lab. Conserve in Unit Two after processing. Signed PM."

Doctor Belish heaved a tired sigh. "So much for hoping I was wrong. Agnes, are you sure you want to proceed?"

"I found Ruby with her guts spilled all over the ground," she replied with a defiant frown. "I watched a houndour be thrown in a zip bag in the pokemon centre after his trainer attacked her. A dead pokemon won't disturb me."

"As you wish. Let's have a look at these then."

To my surprise, he was the one who climbed into the cold chamber. Walking on his knees, he approached the leftmost tube, leaning forward to inspect its base; then shook his head, turned to his right, and progressed to the second tube. He inspected the base, nodded, and turned to us.

"Whatever I'm about to unveil, I'm sorry for it."

Hearts raced as all eyes in the room were riveted on him. The commissioner nodded, and Doctor Belish turned back to the glass cylinder, wiping its front with his sleeve, revealing a transparent liquid at first.

Then the body of a vulpix.

It was a gruesome spectacle. A large slash opened the poor pokemon's body in two, from his hips to the top of his neck. The murderers had partially stitched the wound - just enough for the animal not to spill its guts into the liquid that preserved its corpse - and not bothered cleaning the dried blood that made most of its fur turn from its normal red-orange to a deep crimson.

"Well," Belish said. "That's-"

Topa interrupted him with a loud whine. She stared at the tube with widened eyes, her entire body frozen in a petrified stupor. Agnes also couldn't take her gaze off of the freezer, but her eyes wavered despondently, and her hands covered her mouth and nose as she slowly shook her head.

"No," she whispered. "This can't be."

"Agnes," the commissioner said. "What do you mean?"

"Sir. This" -a sob interrupted her sentence- "this is Topa's son."

The room fell into a heavy silence as all eyes were drawn to my human and Topa, the ninetales still staring at the tube that contained the body of her son.

"Are you sure?" Doctor Belish asked with a questioning frown.

"Certain," Agnes whispered. "He escaped the house and we found his slashed bloody collar in the Gloss Forest. We were certain he had been killed by the serial killer, but... we had no proof."

The colonel peered at the freezer again, his eyes crawling over its length as if to analyse the body inside. Her gaze riveted on the whimpering ninetales, his vapoleon took slow steps towards us, a sorrowful frown visible on the part of her face that wasn't hidden under her terrifying mask; and she sat in front of Topa, gave me a glance, and barked gently.

"Is it true?" she asked. "This is your late son?"

Topa replied with a few nods, unable to look away from the dead vulpix, and whined again. Ilma turned to her trainer, barked, then looked back to the ninetales and bowed.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she said. "Do you need some time alone?"

"No," Topa whispered. "Just..."

Her muzzle shivered, and she didn't finish her sentence.

"There's pokemon in the others too," a policeman said.

My gaze snapped towards the cold room. I hadn't noticed that a policeman had joined Belish in it, and wiped the front of the other freezers. Three houndour and a growlithe laid in them, gutted and hastily stitched like the others.

Tears crept up to me, and I had to growl to myself to repress them. How long had these poor pokemon been there? Was anybody looking for them? Had anybody looked for them? Were they missed?

Was I?

A jolt shook me awake as something soft covered my back. Topa had covered me with her long tails, trying to smile through her distress, and looking at me with worry.

"Topa, are you okay?" I asked.

"I will be fine," she said in an uncertain voice. "We cannot linger here. Not with the risk of the humans coming back."

"Let's take them back," Agnes said in a wavering voice.

The commissioner turned towards her and frowned. "I would recommend against it. I understand what you want, but we can't afford that sort of payload."

"Then at least the vulpix. Let me give my mom some closure. He was her pokemon. We can come back for the others once the investigation is over."

"It's doable," Doctor Belish added. "Let's take this one back for an autopsy and for evidence. He's the only one whose trainer is known, too."

"Fine. But we won't release the body until we've caught the people responsible."

"That's fair," Agnes said.

"Sir, we've recovered the hard drives."

A policeman approached us and handed a small metal box to the commissioner bearing a worn down strip of paper only partially glued to one of its sides. The latter frowned towards it, then seized it, and moved to the side to show the paper to Agnes.

"Project Medium?" she asked. "What is that?"

"I have no idea," he replied. "It's not an official project, that's for sure - at least not one I'm privy to."

"I think we got everything we needed. I'll heed your request, Lieutenant Trokair."

The commissioner nodded towards Sean, who turned to his unit.

"All right!" he shouted. "Let's wrap it up here. Grab this tube and let's go. We got what we were after."

The squad nodded all at once and gathered around the freezer that contained Topa's son. Two of the men lifted it, and their formation changed to a circle that surrounded them as they left the room. Sean, the commissioner, Belish, Agnes, and all their pokemon remained.

Ilma approached us. "Will you be all right, Topa?" she asked. "I wanted to commend you on your help here. I also apologise for having you brought into this. I had no idea we would find something like this."

"I will," the ninetales replied with surprising confidence. "I... will need some time for myself after this. Agnes as well."

"I don't think we're going on another mission any soon. Our teams will need time to read the contents of those hard drives. Until then, you will be given full time to rest."

"Thank you."

The vaporeon nodded sternly, then turned to me with a beaming smile. "Well done here, Ruby. You were a great help. We would have never found this without you."

A warm feeling rushed to my cheeks, but I tossed it aside and glared with focus. "Thank you, but we're not done yet. We still have to catch the humans who did this."

"You are correct. However, it is important to acknowledge successes, especially when the road has been paved with so many failures. Today was indeed a success, and you can take full responsibility for it. It was your victory. It may not matter to you, but I am proud of you."

I couldn't repress a large smile as Ilma bowed to me, mimicked by Pico; and the two pokemon left the room with their trainers, followed by the rest of us. Topa walked last, with no smile on her face, but no sorrow; instead, she looked ahead, determined just as much as I to put an end to this investigation and catch the people who had murdered her son.

Chapter 55

"Project Medium," Agnes mumbled.

It was Thursday. Agnes laid on her bed in her night gown, her bedsheet pulled up to her hips and covering her slightly bent legs that precariously supported the laptop she held on herself with her right hand, while her left hand travelled along Topa's beautiful mane. Lost in a place somewhere in her mind, the ninetales was huddled up on her trainer's side, head on her chest, her eyes down and riveted on something nobody but her could see. I had opted to sit by Agnes's side without cuddling - Topa needed the comfort, not me, and not from me.

My human's eyes were hidden under a grimace of extreme focus as she stared at her laptop, occasionally swiping upwards on its touchpad with the hand that pushed it on her.

She let out a heavy sigh and glanced at me.

"I can't find anything on a Project Medium," she whispered as if to complain to me. "The only vaguely interesting thing I found is that mediums are people who can speak with the dead. The old cleric order had an entire branch dedicated to them, but they're nothing more than street entertainers and charlatans now. Did they just call themselves that way because they are teaming up with Ghost pokemon?" She grumbled, her shoulders dropping as her laptop hung dangerously from her lap, and turned to me. "Do you think they really could talk to the dead?"

I shook my head with conviction.

"You're right," she said with a smile. Her voice faded as she turned back to her computer with a sad frown, "You're right..."

All three of us jolted when the doorbell rang.

"That must be them," Agnes said. "Ruby, would you get the door?"

I sprang up with a joyful bark and rushed to the entrance. As expected, it was the commissioner's voice that came from the interphone, and I pushed the door button for them, waiting by the door to Agnes's apartment. They were once again in full uniform, the commissioner accompanied with his absol, and Doctor Belish with Ilma. He carried with him a large suitcase as well as a rectangular pouch wrapped around his shoulder.

A cold shiver shook my body when I saw my vaporeon friend, images of her terrifying armour coming back to me.

"Good afternoon, Ruby," Doctor Belish said. He knelt and gave me a few gentle pets on the head. "Is Agnes awake? I hope we didn't pull her out of her sleep."

I nodded with a bark and led them to Agnes's bedroom. While Dante opted to sit by the door, Ilma hurried in and jumped onto the bed almost on top of the sleeping ninetales, then barked towards my human. Agnes chuckled, winced in pain, and patted her head as she greeted her superiors with a tired voice. Her laptop had been closed and rested on her night stand.

"Good morning," the commissioner said. "How have you three been doing?"

Agnes's smile disappeared as she glanced at the ninetales, then gently wrapped her left arm around Topa's beautiful neck and dragged her into a tighter embrace. Ilma jumped out of the way and walked around Agnes's legs to sit next to me.

"Ruby and I are doing fine," she said after a delay, "Topa is... considering what we found, I would say she's handling it remarkably well. I've been taking care of her as much as I could."

The ninetales whined and quietly readjusted her position.

"I'm sorry," Doctor Belish said.

"When will my parents be told?" Agnes asked. "My mom needs to know. She's been grieving for him for too long. She needs closure."

"When the investigation is over, we will release the body to your family," the commissioner said with a stern frown. "Until then, this discovery must be kept secret. We still don't know who those people are and what they have access to."

Agnes's shoulders dropped. "Was there nothing interesting on those drives?"

The two policemen glanced at each other in silence, undecipherable frowns distorting their concerned faces. Agnes peered at them, her eyebrows drawing together and her gaze jumping between the two at an increasing pace. As I glanced towards Ilma, her cold stare sent a terrifying shiver down my spine and my eyes fled back to my trainer.

"What is it?" Agnes asked in a pressing voice.

"There wasn't much in there, the files we could access concerned only the pokemon that were captured within the cryotubes. Mostly notes about the experiments that were performed. But-"

"What did the notes say?"

Doctor Belish let out a frustrated sigh. "From what I gathered, the pokemon were killed in the forest, and whoever these people are just watched them die and took notes. Then they brought the bodies back, autopsied them, and stitched them back together. There were more experiments to be done, but nothing happened and there was no explanation why."

"Why autopsy the bodies? They were the ones to kill these pokemon. They don't need to figure out the cause of death."

"They were looking for something. The reports were quite detailed on changes that happened during death. I assume the autopsies are looking for internal changes as well, at least a specific one. I don't know what it could be."

"Can I read them?"

Doctor Belish stepped forward, opening the large suitcase he carried with him. He pulled a laptop out of it, switched it on, then carefully placed it on Agnes's lap, and made a quick head gesture towards Ilma who hopped down from the bed and walked back towards him.

"This is the only computer that contains these files," he said. "They are highly confidential, so I trust you won't talk about them with anybody."

"I don't talk to anybody anyway. I figured you would be talking about something confidential when you called me yesterday. I even sent Rakuen home before you came here. We'll be fine."

"We also won't allow you to transfer the files to your own laptop for safety reasons. The encryption was fairly easy to breach, but we don't know if the files contain a virus or some spyware. We requisitioned a new computer from a shop unrelated to police in case the files were dangerous."

"Obviously."

"One more thing," the commissioner said. His voice wavered with insecurity. "Don't read the file titled Unit Two. Not yet."

Agnes frowned in confusion at first, her eyes lowering themselves and pacing left and right. Then, they widened, her shoulders dropped, and she peered at the ninetales by her side; and she replied with no words but a grave nod.

"Knock yourself out, then," Doctor Belish said. "It's going to take you a bit, so would you like me to make you something to eat?"

"If you can make those awful chansey eggs edible, please do. I wouldn't say no to a snack, to be honest. You can get something for yourself and for the commissioner too."

The colonel chuckled. "I can't work miracles. I'll go fix something for us then."

He tapped the commissioner on the back with an amused smile and gestured for Ilma to stay, then withdrew from the room, and I laid on Agnes's side as she began browsing the files.

She read in absolute silence, her face remaining surprisingly neutral. I couldn't see the screen from my position and couldn't read what she was reading, and I wasn't sure I wanted to. My eyes were drawn to Ilma, nested on the floor as if to sleep, and for a split second, I considered huddling up on her - but I wasn't certain it was appropriate for us to cuddle in a setting that I wasn't sure was entirely private. Belish returned quickly with a cup of chocolate milk for everyone, as well as slices of cakes, and a few treats for us pokemon.

"This is horrible," Agnes said when she finished reading. My vision had turned cerulean again, and she picked the last bit of cake from her plate hovering about her side. "The way they describe... searching the bowels. Turning the heart around like they expect it to start beating again. Is that what they're trying to do? Prove they can talk to dead pokemon?"

"We really don't know," the commissioner said. "All we know for sure is that the deaths were not accidental. They intended to kill all those pokemon. We believe the Project Medium group to be cultists, maybe former clerics, but we have no idea what their goals are."

"The haunter were key to their experiments," Agnes whispered. "But all four of those pokemon were wild. Topa's son wasn't. Did they think he was?"

There was another silence, and the two policemen stared at each other again. Agnes frowned in their direction, confused, her eyes now wavering in ostensible distress.

"They did not," Belish said after a pause. "Read the Unit Two file."

My ears perked up, and I barked with energy.

Agnes peeked at me, then at Topa, and heaved an insecure sigh. "May I read it out loud?" Belish nodded, and she gently shook the ninetales by her side. "Topa, please wake up. You might not want to hear any of this, but I think it's important."

"It's about your son," I added as the ninetales raised her head. "The notes they have about him."

"Oh," she said in a neutral tone. A yawn then took her, and she shook her head. "Thank you for waking me up. I want to know what they did to him. I need to know."

She greeted our trainer with a quiet whine - earning her a few gentle pets on the head - and nodded. Agnes took a deep breath, turned to the computer on her lap, and began reading.

" Subject number eleven has already been chosen, " she read out loud. She marked a break and the laptop trembled. " He resides in the Founder's home and must be disposed of. The family's ninetales must follow suit. "

Topa chirped with anger, and Agnes raised wide eyes towards her superiors.

"The Founder's home?" she asked in a wavering voice.

The commissioner nodded sternly. "How long have your parents had ownership of that mansion in the forest?"

"No," Agnes whispered, shaking her head. "They have nothing to do with this. That's not possible. They bought the mansion at an auction

a few years ago. Mom was pregnant with me. Topa wasn't even born yet. They lived way far west in Goldtown, in the Greatlands, and moved here to expand their business and get away from the tourists."

"We will have to check the town's records and interrogate your parents. If what you said is accurate, then they might not be directly involved since the murders started long before you were born, so before they came here. Still, these records make clear mention of their mansion - several times, even. Keep reading."

"Tell me you're not suspecting my family. Why would this group attack and kill one of their own? They're not-"

Doctor Belish silenced her with a hand movement. "We are not suspecting your family. We do however need information on the mansion and that is why we've subpoenaed them."

Agnes opened her mouth as if to protest. Sitting by her side, I frowned with anger towards the two policemen - was it not a bit excessive to summon her parents to court just to obtain information on their house? Were they lying to my trainer when they said her family was not being suspected?

Was she suspected?

Agnes cleared her throat, let out a defeated sigh, and resumed. "*Our attempts at penetrating the mansion have all been thwarted by the ninetales, but the young vulpix has been receptive to our signals and we have successfully captured his attention. We will slow down the break-ins and try to drag him out instead. Once the family is scared enough to leave, we can make our way in and retrieve the journal.*"

Her breathing accelerated, as did Topa's and mine. She looked up at the two policemen again, but the commissioner gestured for her to continue reading and she turned back to the monitor with a deep

breath. Her pupils shrank progressively as she read in silence, until she glanced at the ninetales, a sorrowful frown on her face.

Her words wavered as she read, "*We've managed to lure the vulpix out. We caught him escaping the house and trying to hide behind the swimming pool. All it took was opening the portal to get him to follow us, and we took him to the edge of the forest for processing. Unfortunately, nothing of value was noticed during his-*"

Topa's powerful whine echoing with sadness burst through the silence of the room. She had raised her head and intently stared at the screen as if hoping to read its contents, tears falling from her eyes.

"I've had enough," Agnes whispered.

She slammed the laptop shut and handed it back to Doctor Belish. No sooner were her hands free than she dragged Topa onto her, embracing her with as much strength as her weakened arms allowed her to.

The two policemen observed a few minutes of silence as the ninetales wept in her trainer's arms. I stood by Agnes's side, stupefied, my eyes wandering across Topa's body and my legs trembling with the will to do something to help her but stopped by my mind's inability to decide what.

I jolted when cold fur brushed my side.

"There is nothing you can say that will help her right now," Ilma whispered, standing next to me. "She is experiencing the full shock of grief. The realisation that her son really was dead was difficult to stomach, and she did so with strength I wouldn't have expected; but now she has confirmation that he was murdered and that is too much to bear."

"No," I whispered. "I don't think that's what's happening. She had already accepted the death of her son."

I remained quiet as Ilma frowned in my direction and attempted prodding me for more information. Her voice seemed to have faded as my attention was deported to the weeping ninetales, and hidden deep in the midst of her dismay and despondent sobs, merging with the tears of pain that wet her beautiful fur, I could hear shameful gasps of relief.

"Whatever this journal is that they're talking about, it must be extremely valuable to them," the commissioner whispered.

"Enough that they would send people in pretending to be regular burglars," Agnes said. Topa laid on her, fast asleep but still breathing rapidly. "And it is somewhere within the mansion."

"We figured that we may have given them an opportunity to take the item back when we removed your family from their home, so we have the area under constant surveillance now. We will be alerted of any suspicious activity. It's been quiet so far, but I can only guess that they are preparing their attack since all their previous ones failed - thanks to Topa, if I understand it right?"

"That's right."

My heart raced as I sat beside Agnes, tapping the bed with impatience.

"Maybe you were right," she whispered, her head and shoulders dropping. "Maybe my parents know something."

"Do you have an idea what that journal is?" the commissioner asked. "Anything in particular we should be looking for? Or at least where to start?"

"Oh, I know where to start." She shuddered, and her right hand crawled along her bed to reach me. "There's a wing in the second floor that my father forbade us from accessing."

"For-"

A powerful bark caused my body to spring up and Topa to jolt awake. Tails wagging furiously, I walked towards Agnes, nodding with energy and barking repeatedly. My snout bobbed up and down as I sniffed the air.

"It would seem you hit the nail on the head," Doctor Belish said. "I'm going to summon a small team to search the mansion immediately. We can worry about the legal minutiae later. We shouldn't give the cultists any more time to prepare."

The commissioner nodded, then turned to me as Doctor Belish rushed out of the room, Ilma in tow. "Ruby," he said, "do you know anything about that wing?"

I nodded furiously once more, and intently tapped the bed sheets with my nose.

"A smell," Agnes said. "I'm willing to bet that it's like in the forest, isn't it?"

I nodded, then tapped the sheet once more and shook my head. To my surprise, my trainer let out a despondent sigh, then looked away.

"I'm blind," she whispered. "Had I been better at communicating with Ruby, we could have solved this much earlier. Maybe fewer pokemon would have died."

"No, you couldn't. You couldn't have known your own house would wind up being related to our investigation. Besides, the breakthrough that allowed us to make progress was the lack of smells, which was your discovery. Without you, we would still be stuck."

He peeked back towards his pokemon, who took a few respectful steps forward.

"We don't have time to weep over our mistakes," the commissioner said. "Where is the saddle? Let's get going as fast as we can; Colonel Belish will join us at the mansion. Until we've recovered the

journal ourselves, we must assume that the enemy has us beat in speed."

"Saddle is in the living room," Agnes said. "Topa, can you fetch it? Ruby, get me my keys and come help me here."

Getting Agnes and Dante prepared was more difficult than I would have expected - particularly given that my entire body trembled and made my telekinesis unsteady as a result - but we were out in the commissioner's personal car in less than thirty minutes and on our way to the mansion. Seated by our human, Topa too trembled visibly, her uneasy eyes wandering through the interior of the vehicle and constantly avoiding mine. I opened my muzzle many times, but couldn't find anything to say that could have cheered her up or calmed her down. Even Agnes seemed uneasy, taking controlled deep breaths and clenching her fists upon her thighs, but her gaze at least sought mine, and I looked at her as much as I could on our way when I was not peeking at Topa and trying to talk to her.

It should have been relief that shook my spine when the car stopped away from the oversized portal of the mansion and under the cover of the trees surrounding it, but apprehension finally managed to take hold of me as I stepped out of the vehicle and the commissioner helped Agnes mount the kneeling absol. Topa, on the other hand, displayed a focused frown, her tails forming a fuzzy fan behind her, and her eyes creeping over the metal gate as if trying to burst in through the power of her telekinesis.

Finally, I managed to compose myself and walked up to her.

"Topa," I whispered.

She lost her focused frown and turned to me with a smile, but I couldn't find anything else to say.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I know you have been trying to find something to say to help me. I am sorry, but I do not want to talk right now. I want to focus on this and find out what has really been

going on and who those people who lured my son away to kill him are."

"I doubt we will find much information on that," the absol said as Agnes adjusted her position on his saddle. His deeply resonating voice caused me to jolt. "At least until we claim possession of the journal the files mentioned - assuming our enemies did not already claim it."

"Let them try," Topa whispered. Ears laid and fangs bared, she snapped a terrifying gaze towards the absol. "I hope we find some of them."

"That we might, but if we do, please give me your word that you will not kill them."

"I will not kill them. But I cannot promise they will be unharmed."

The absol nodded. "That is your right."

"Topa, please don't be so angry," Agnes said. "We might need you on this, so keep your wits about you, okay? You'll have all the time to vent once we end this whole thing."

The ninetales looked up with a whimper, but nodded docilely. Sitting away from her, another terrified shudder shook me, and I couldn't bring myself to look at her. For the first time since we had met, she had shown the true extent of her power - an aura so strong that it overshadowed mine completely and was on a level similar to what I had felt coming from Pico.

And, for the first time since we had met, she was angry.

Chapter 56

It didn't take long for Doctor Belish to join us. He exited his small car first, followed by Ilma; and Sergeant Anish and Sean were next, accompanied with their pokemon and the commissioner's talonflame. They were both armed with the same SMGs they had during the forest raid, but none of them wore any armour.

The two officers pulled two enormous cases out of the car as Doctor Belish approached Agnes and the commissioner, then planted himself before his superior with a formal salute. Ilma sat to his right, slightly behind him, lowering her head in deference, and Cinder flew towards his trainer, landing on his raised arm.

"This is the team I've gathered," Doctor Belish said. "They're the best I could get on such short notice."

"Did you choose them yourself or did they volunteer for the mission?"

"I chose them. I had to pull them out of classes for it, so we will need to find excuses for their absences."

The commissioner shrugged. "I'll sign an executive order for a classified mission. I mean, everyone knows their ranks and why they have them. I like to think other students will have the decency not to prod."

I peered at Pride with renewed awe. He sat patiently by the car as his trainer kitted Agnes up with armour and a weapon right next to Topa and me, and the sandslash waited with him, both watching in silence. I was aware that Sean and Pride were still students, but not Anish and his sandslash; what kind of feats had they achieved that had given them such remarkable promotions while still being in school? What had they done that had made them more trustworthy for an emergency than actual qualified policemen or soldiers?

"Where are Derek and Pico?" the commissioner asked.

"I thought it unnecessary to bring them along. Ruby and Topa can cover the Fire-type functions we need, even if they are inexperienced, and his close friendship with Agnes makes him unreliable for this mission. Besides, I've never seen Ilma express as much respect for anyone as she has for Topa - with the exception maybe of Ruby." Doctor Belish turned to me with a smile, then to the ninetales with a respectful nod. "I don't believe we've seen anything of her real power yet, am I right?"

Topa looked away with a blush as the absol next to her nodded knowingly.

"I deserve no such praise," she said, turning to the vaporeon. "I do not consider myself even close to being powerful. I do not know why you chose to lie to your trainer in this manner."

"The only one lying here is you," Ilma said, frowning. "You think yourself weak because you never had your power tested. You might be good at hiding it, but I can tell you're strong. You are without a doubt one of the strongest pokemon I have yet met, above even Pico and Pride. I don't know why you hide your strength, but you had me fooled for a time. There is something unique about your power."

Topa let out a disappointed sigh and shook her head, and I frowned towards Ilma. When had she had a chance to gauge Topa's strength? She hadn't been around earlier, when the ninetales got so angry that she let some of her power through.

As I opened my muzzle to say something, Sean and Sergeant Anish - both now wearing their full armour - interrupted us, handing rifles and armour to Doctor Belish and the commissioner.

"Your gear, Colonel, Commissioner," Anish said.

"Let's get geared up," the commissioner said, seizing his armour. "Get ready, you three. Ilma, give Ruby and Topa a briefing. We're

going in as soon as we're set. Cinder, you know what to do. You have permission to use lethal force if you are attacked."

Ilma nodded and hid behind the absol as the talonflame took off with a quiet screech and disappeared into the canopy. Agnes had been equipped with full armour and a rifle like in the first raid, and remained completely silent, her eyes lost somewhere on the ground and hidden under a significant frown.

"Ruby, Topa, come here," the vaporeon said. She marked a pause as we waddled closer to her. "You'll be taking front with me this time. As our Fire-types, you will be the main firepower of the squad. Use long-range fire to neutralise targets shooting at us or using their powers. Usually, there are pokemon and humans specialised in closing in to get past Barrier, so be ready to also use close-range powers. I doubt we're going to meet organised resistance, but it doesn't hurt to be prepared. Pride and I will be protecting you while you eliminate the enemy. Any questions?"

"You..." I gulped loudly, my body wavering. "You don't think we'll be meeting anyone, do you?"

Ilma shook her head. "No way. Not here, at least. We likely will once we find and raid their main laboratory."

My gaze insecurely crept over the ground as I nodded.

"What is the sandslash's role in the squad?" Topa asked.

The sandslash snapped his head to us. Staring at us with his black eyes, he canted his head to the side, then slightly opened his muzzle and waved with his right claws.

"He covers our flanks and rear, and can help set up a retreat or deal with close-by enemies if we are overwhelmed," Ilma said, returning the smile. "Normally, we would have a Poison-type with us for that, but sandslash is far better in domestic missions. Its spikes are

extremely sturdy and its claws can cut through anything - very useful for getting through walls or stopping vehicles."

Our eyes were drawn to Doctor Belish as he stepped towards us, wearing the same full armour and balaclava as during the forest raid, his SMG resting against his stomach and strapped around his shoulders. Sergeant Anish and the commissioner walked behind him, the sandslash tailing them with its muzzle still ajar in a gentle smile, and Dante took a few more steps to bring Agnes closer to us.

"Have you briefed them?" the colonel asked, looking at his pokemon. Topa and I nodded with a bark. "Good. We're about to start. Follow Agnes's instructions - she knows the terrain and will guide us to where we need to go. For the purpose of this mission, she is the commanding officer."

She adjusted her balaclava to cover her face and took a deep breath. "Let's go. Topa, make us a wisp. Dante, bring me to the gate; Doctor Belish, Sergeant Anish, you'll need to open it manually. We don't use an automated system."

The two men nodded as Topa summoned a wisp that floated about Agnes's head and our group advanced, exiting the safety of our cover. Of all the hearts I could hear beating through the overwhelming silence of the forest, mine beat the fastest; and walking by my side, her entire body shivering with impatience, Topa's heart was so calm it seemed she was oblivious to the circumstances at hand, but a deep frown covered her unwavering eyes that were stuck staring forward.

Agnes, the colonel, and the commissioner shouldered their weapons when she gave the order to open the gates. The giant metal slabs slid over the gravel beneath them effortlessly, but the two men handling the doors didn't push them open all the way, leaving a small opening between them.

"Any signs of attempted forced entry?" the commissioner asked.

"No," Sergeant Anish replied. "Not even a scratch mark. The door is cold, though, I can feel it through my gloves."

Agnes took the keys back from Sean, pocketed them, and took a deep breath.

"I don't want to hear any comments on the house I lived in," she whispered. "Let's go. Be careful, there is a long open path before we reach the main doors."

We carefully proceeded under the feeble protection of too sparsely placed trees that led to the mansion's high walls. As we crossed the narrow opening of the gate, Topa froze and stared at the doors to her sides, her shivering eyes lit by a shy cerulean glow that pulsed weakly like a fading heartbeat; and she took a deep breath, then a deep sigh, her head lowering itself to point to the floor, and looked up with determination.

"Are you all right?" Ilma asked.

"I am," Topa whispered. "Let us make haste. Just because there is no sign of forced entry does not mean nobody made it in. Some of the burglars I caught managed to climb the fence, they might have done it again despite your surveillance."

"Be on your guard," Agnes said. "Let's go."

Pride crossed the portal first, a focused frown turning his otherwise friendly face terrifying. Topa and I followed suit, then Ilma, then our humans, and finally, the rest of the pokemon. A quick glance around us with psychically enhanced sight taught me that Pride had created a large dome that surrounded the squad, and Topa's wisp floated in its exact centre.

Once spread out in our formation within the confines of the mansion's immense garden, we rushed through the front path towards the main door. My heart competed with the tumult of feet

and paws upon the ground to painfully pound my ears, but we made it to our target uncontested.

"Do you smell anything?" Agnes whispered.

I lowered my head, sniffing at the door. My heart skipped a beat as too few of the odours I should have detected on the door were present, and Agnes's most of all was missing; but there were odours and no sign of them having been occulted or tampered with.

"Good," Agnes said as I nodded. She took a deep breath, frowning in focus. "There will be many ambush spots in the main hall from all the corridors. If there is anyone here, we won't have time to clear them all before being attacked. It's likely our steps will resonate as well. If we have any surprise advantage, it will be gone the moment we enter the mansion. If we have to fight at any point, it will be now."

Her eyes wavered as they jumped between Topa and me, and her focus vanished into an expression of despondent exhaustion.

"Be careful," she whispered, staring at us. She forced herself back to being serious, and announced to the squad, "Breach."

Sean nodded, then leaned forward, unlocked the door, and threw it open.

The metallic jingling of the keys filled the hall with a chanting ruckus. Pride took a step in as Ilma and Topa leaned forward and the humans behind us raised their weapons like our two frontline pokemon bared their fangs. The beating of my heart fought back the loud echo the room threw at me as I too leaned forward with a delay, preparing a ball of fire within my throat.

Darkness had overtaken the main hall, covering it in a mournful shroud of unknown shadows. The chandelier fell lifeless from the ceiling, defiled by the disrespectful blue light emanating from Topa's wisp and echoing the strong reflection the marble floor sent back towards it. Only respite from the violent shifts in luminosity, the red

carpets forming walkways throughout the mansion dampened our steps somewhat, creating muffled noises that contributed to the oppressive atmosphere of our situation.

Hearts competed in a pointless race as our squad remained perfectly immobile, guns and fangs primed, until the fading jingle of keys vanished into the darkness of the corridors.

Once silence took over, both Topa and I scanned the main hall. While her heart had slowed down again, mine continued racing to the point where I already felt exhausted despite having done nothing tiring; and through the overwhelming stillness of the room, tears crept up to my muzzle and forced me to take deep breaths.

Abandoned and dead, the mansion felt no different to me from when I lived in it.

"Second floor," Agnes whispered. The power of her weak voice tore through the silence and caused me to jump. "Left wing. Keep going until you find a large metal door."

The squad proceeded carefully, Agnes leaning forward onto her mount so that she would not be toppled backwards as she climbed the stairs. As we stepped into the forbidden corridor, even Topa's heart accelerated with worry, and she smelled as anxious as I was when we stopped in front of the slab of metal that guarded the way.

"This is it," Agnes said in a wavering voice. "The forbidden wing. Colonel Belish, Sean, cover our backs. Topa too."

The commissioner approached the door with careful steps, rifle at the ready, and leaned forward.

"Is this really a door? There's no keyhole. It looks like someone just poured a large slab of metal and used it to condemn this wing of the mansion."

Agnes shrugged. "Ruby, can you inspect the door?"

The wisp I created gave me the confidence to nod resolutely despite my racing heart. Its strong light would have burnt my eyes from how close I kept it to me were it not so gentle it seemed to be unable to cause any damage, and as I moved towards the door, I began sniffing intently, standing on my hind legs to reach as much of the metal as I could. The light of the wisp revealed no keyhole, and only a few smells.

I recognised my own scent on the door, likely several months old from my first encounter with it that was cut short by Topa, as well as Sir's scent that covered the higher half of it, so old that it barely made it through the metallic odour that overpowered it. Almost invisible under the rest, a faint smell transpired through, remnants of a time so old I could not even estimate it carrying with them the marks of a man of advanced age. A man unknown.

I turned around with a confused bark, then stared at Agnes as my wisp floated towards Doctor Belish and I shook my head.

"Did you smell something notable?" she asked. I nodded, circled the colonel's head with my wisp, and vigorously shook my head. "A man? A man you don't recognise?"

"Who were the previous owners of this mansion?" the commissioner asked.

"I don't know, sir," Agnes said. "All I know is that the house was put on auction to cover their debt. My father would know the details, he handled the auction himself. He visited the house several times before we moved in, but it was all with a realtor."

"We'll need the realtor's name, and a warrant to obtain information on who sold the house and where they live now. Looks like I made the right call having subpoenaed your parents."

The large man stepped away from the door.

"Let's melt this down and get in."

"I don't think we should, sir," Agnes said. "The mansion is built mostly in wood. Sergeant Anish, could your sandslash cut through it?"

"Most certainly, but it's going to be loud. We'll lose any stealth we have."

Agnes let out a deep sigh. "The house is empty. And if we had any stealth, we lost it when we crossed the main hall. Let's just do it. Everyone stand back. Topa, get ready to send a wisp in. Ruby, prepare Ember and throw it at whatever appears behind the door."

A heavy gulp accompanied my insecure nod. As Topa created a new wisp and kept it in front of the squad, we all walked back to a respectable distance, weapons at the ready, with the exception of the sandslash who stepped forward with a focused frown.

"Use Metal Claw and Slash," Anish said.

His pokemon nodded. Growing slightly bigger, his claws took on a metallic coat tinted blue by the reflected wisps that floated around them, and they filled the entire manor with a high-pitched haunting hiss as the sandslash threw himself forward, slashing the door faster than I could track it. Its left half remained upright, seemingly undisturbed by the attack, but the right side hopped inwards, tilting towards us dangerously. It froze in the air as it began falling, surrounded by a light blue halo, and was carefully laid on the wall next to it.

I threw a wisp into the newly opened room as soon as there was enough space for it. Pride and Sean rushed in first, closely followed by Topa, Ilma, and her trainer.

"Clear," Sean called from inside the room. "I think we're good."

Agnes took a deep breath, her hands shaking together with her heart.

"Are you all right?" Doctor Belish asked.

"I am. Let's get this over with. Ruby, come with me."

I nodded and followed her as Dante brought her inside. A cursory glance at the door taught me that it was a regular wooden door coated in metal on both sides, and I stepped into the unknown room, walking right next to my trainer.

"Good call on not melting the door," Sean said, nudging Agnes with a smirk.

She didn't reply, looking around with a frown between focus and distress. She needed only peek at Topa for the ninetales to nod and spread numerous wisps around us.

We had walked into an immense room, bigger even than the main hall. The grey snow of a thick layer of dust replaced the white marble of the rest of the mansion, covering a perfectly preserved parquet that shyly peeked through the footsteps we left behind us. A long wall extended the corridor to our right, made of wooden patterns of a lighter colour than what little we could see of the floor and split into regularly built rectangles that reached high up to a cornice of smooth stone. Besides a beautiful galaxy of dead lightbulbs chained through a constellation of silver falling in the centre of the room, the ceiling was empty.

Intricately decorated in woven patterns, wooden furniture of various sizes and heights split the floor into a grid of convenient corridors reaching through each of them, broken sometimes by large tables cocooning the dark oak chairs tucked under them or the contrasting greyish colour of dusty kitchenware. Stuck in the corner between two angled walls far on our left was a series of appliances bordered on one side by a large fridge and on the other by a sink. A window, hastily condemned by wooden planks that seemed to have been

taken out of the floor, surmounted the sink, accompanied by its sisters regularly spread across the walls but doomed to being forever closed. The central corner of the room, immediately in front of us, hosted a tall kitchen cabinet laid against the wall to our right; and immediately next to it, a closed door caught our attention. Besides the heartbeats and heavy breaths of our squad, there were no sounds that reached my ears. Were it not covered by a thick layer of dust that hid any other odours I would have hoped to smell, the entire place looked like it had only just been cleaned by the maids.

"Is this someone's living space?" Doctor Belish asked. "It looks like it hasn't seen use in a hundred years."

"What is this?" Agnes whimpered, her voice shaking despondently. "Why was this hidden behind that door? It's nothing like any of the other wings of the mansion."

The commissioner turned to her. "Were you not aware of this?"

"I had no idea, sir," she whispered. "This wing has been forbidden since I was born. Topa's mom would never let me get even in the rooms we had access to. She would guard the corridor like I was going to die if I got past her."

The ninetales nodded slowly next to me, her eyes widened in wonder and fear. While the rest of the squad remained frustratingly calm in the face of what we had uncovered, my heart beat restlessly in my chest.

"Let's search the place," Agnes said after a deep breath. "There's another door there, that's our next step. Ruby, stay here by the door with me. Topa, make sure your wisps are following everyone."

The ninetales nodded as everyone spread into the room, accompanied by their pokemon - and, in the commissioner's case, by Topa herself. Noises of drawers and cupboards being opened resonated loudly in the silence of the dark room, but there was

nothing to be found except remarkably clean silverware and a fridge that had not been filled before the wing was condemned.

"There's nothing," Sean reported. "Just an empty kitchen. And some nice lacquerware, too."

"Gather here," Agnes said after a delay. The squad assembled around her, and she continued in a barely audible whisper. "Stay alert when going into the next room. It's not impossible there's an ambush waiting. Stay by the door out of sight. Topa, throw your wisps in the room first when we open it. Pride, do you know Flash?"

The espeon confirmed with a nod.

"Use it on the wisps. The one visible to us first, then wait two seconds, and use it again on all the other wisps at once. Then we can breach in. Ruby, Ilma, get ready to attack anyone we find inside. Sergeant Anish, your sandslash will be tasked with charging at the back if there's anything."

"Got it."

Agnes nodded, and the squad moved. Sean and Pride took positions against the back wall, rifle at the ready, while the rest of us hid on the other side of the door closer to the centre of the room. My eyes turned cerulean and I took hold of the door's handle with telekinesis, my heart jumping with the sounds of rifles being shouldered behind me. After a few tense seconds, a single word whispered by my human had me fling the door open, and Topa's wisps rushed into the room just as fast. Pride followed through with his Flash move, causing a single burst of blinding light, then a series of several after a short delay; and my heart fell through my paws as I jumped into the room together with Ilma, a ball of fire ready in my muzzle.

The room was empty.

A heavy sigh would have followed my deep breath had a strong scent of putrefaction overwhelming in the air not made me gag.

Other pokemon winced around me, even the humans under their balaclavas, and all our eyes turned in unison to the other end of the room.

A skeleton laid on top of a queen bed perpendicular to us. The gentle blue light of Topa's wisps gave its dark green sheets an otherworldly echo partially absorbed by formerly wet spots all around the remains and highlighted the lustre of an ornate night stand to its left. Large armoires populated the wall to our right, and a large desk with an old computer tower and monitor the slanted wall facing us; the last wall, to our direct left, had been left empty aside from the bars condemning its closed window. Hanging from a beam, a long noose fell from the ceiling, mockingly pointing towards the corpse's neck.

Agnes broke the silence, panting under the hand that covered her nose. "What? I've been... there was a dead man in my house this whole time?"

She visibly jumped when the commissioner put a hand on her shoulder.

"Let's get this over with," he ordered. "Sean, search the desk. Belish, go inspect the body. Anish, you take the nightstand." As the other members of the squad nodded and spread out, accompanied with their pokemon, the commissioner seized Agnes's shoulders and stared at her. "Agnes. Keep yourself together. Now isn't the time to break your composure."

She stared at the skeleton with wide eyes, her body shivering. A quick bark from me caught her attention, and she peeked at me as I gave her a resolute stare; and she nodded with rapid breaths.

"You're right, Ruby," she whispered. "You're right. I can do this."

"I can't determine any obvious cause of death," Doctor Belish said. "All I can say is that this was a man, and he definitely did not hang himself. For all I know, he could have starved himself to death here,

or died of a heart attack. I think it's not too much of a stretch to assume this is the Founder?"

"I found a letter," Sean said.

He turned around, showing a large letter of white paper in a golden frame.

" *My son,* " he read, " *I am sorry I am leaving you alone in this unfair world.* " He remained quiet as he read on for himself. "It's a suicide letter, I guess from the man's mother? And then he killed himself because his mom did?"

"We can't jump to conclusions yet," Agnes said. She took a deep breath. "We still haven't found the journal."

"I think I got something," Anish called.

He pulled a small book enclosed in leather from the top drawer of the night stand. Its black cover bore only the two letters "PM" etched in gold.

"Looks like we got what we needed," Belish said.

"Do another cursory pass," Agnes said. "Let's make sure we aren't missing anything."

We took time to go through the entire room again. The commissioner collected the evidence we had found, and extracted the computer's dusty hard drive, while the others searched through drawers and cupboards exchanging places and Agnes sat in the centre of the room, directing Topa's wisps. I remained by her side, gently chirping and barking as if to converse with her, and every one of my prods was met with a broken smile.

As she was about to exit, Agnes turned back and looked at the skeleton once more.

"I'll have someone pick it up once this ordeal is over," the commissioner said. "For now, we must assume the area is not safe."

"I understand. I'm just wondering if my father knew about this. Part of me wants to believe he couldn't have been a bad enough father to let his daughters live in a house with a corpse in it, but at the same time, he knew something was off about this place or he wouldn't have forbidden access to it."

"Remember I have your parents subpoenaed. I will question them on it."

Agnes let out a deep sigh. "I think I will have to talk to them again. There is more unfinished business than I thought."

The commissioner put a comforting hand on her shoulder with a proud smile. "I can arrange that. You've been going through a lot lately, you deserve a vacation after that. Just stay strong for a little more."

"If by vacation you mean I can resume my studies for SWAT, I would be happy to."

The commissioner tapped her shoulders a few times with a sorry smile, but didn't say anything more and left. Agnes took a deep breath and commanded Dante to follow his trainer, and all of us left the mansion as stealthily as we had infiltrated it.

Chapter 57

I am a medium. Or rather, a few years from now, I was a medium.

I went to my doctor last week. My memory slips had been getting worse, but as I keep myself intellectually active as much as I can, I was not surprised that my brain is sometimes overloaded to the point of forgetting things and I went with no fear in my heart. In retrospect, I should have been sooner, when I started forgetting appointments. Not that it would have made a difference.

I should have known something was wrong when my doctor listened to my family and personal histories with an increasingly sombre frown. I should have asked questions when she sent me to get imagery done of my brain. I should have pressed for information when she referred me to a neurologist with scans I did not understand. Maybe I could have prepared myself.

At first, I thought it was a sick prank because of my work. The old joke of mediums all being people with undiagnosed issues and hearing voices that are not real. I almost got angry at the neurologist, but I didn't, because he is a neurologist - and the sorry look on his face was enough to convince me he was serious.

He diagnosed me with early-onset dementia.

I didn't need to listen to the rest of his explanation. I knew dementia. A young girl once came to me so that she could talk to her very alive mother, who did not remember her name and asked her every morning who she was and what she was doing in her house. It tore my heart to explain to the poor girl that I could not talk to her absent mother because I could only talk to the dead, and her mother was not. "Will she remember me after she dies?" was the girl's only question, and I couldn't stop myself from answering yes despite having no idea. A part of me left the room with her when she turned around and said she hoped her mom would die soon.

That was what was waiting for me. I had only a few years left, and then I would no longer be myself. I wouldn't be someone else - I would just be no one. There would be nothing left of me but an empty husk still biologically functionable, but not worthy of being called a person. And, most importantly, there would be nothing left of my skills, and I would not know how to use the power with which I was blessed.

The doctor said there is no treatment - only palliative medication that unreliably slows the progress of the disease. I refused it at first - if death is my fate, then let it be quick. I am not going to spend years of my life slowly withering without having the mental presence to be aware of it. I will die on my own terms, and as myself.

This shall be the first entry in this journal. This is not my personal diary, but a collected recollection of the notable events over the few years that will lead to my death. My diary I will bury with me when the time comes. When I wake up tomorrow, I will begin my arrangements to ensure I remain myself until the very end, however quick it may be.

I don't want to die.

My dreams have been haunted by visions of myself falling into madness. Voices from the dead accompanied me each day I was lost more, becoming ever louder as less of me remained, until they took over completely and my body was a puppet controlled only by the otherworldly visitors. Large hands covered by the purple veil of the afterlife picked at my soul, dimming my light every day, until there was nothing but darkness.

There must be a way I can save myself. Not in this life, that much I know; nor in this body. But my soul, the essence of what makes me me, has to be salvageable from my terrible fate. The dead would not have sent these images were they not trying to communicate how to save myself from the destruction of dementia.

I am dismayed to realise when I try to commune with the dead that they remain silent to my calls. I seek only guidance, not answers; but it seems that the questions I ask are not ones they are willing to answer. The answers I must find on my own, with the only piece of information they deigned slip into my mind. Thanks to the untimely death of my rich parents, many years ago now, I have abundant financial means, and thus shall they be used: I will prove that souls exist, then once that is done, I will find a way to snapshot mine; and once my body breaks and I move on to join those with whom I talk, I will remain as I am, fully myself and with my power.

The same dreams are still haunting my nights. They are a message, I know that; and though I know its meaning, I feel like there is more to it than I can understand.

My first action in my new pursuit was to rethink my life. I have fired all the staff that my parents had forced me to keep working in the mansion as part of their will; most of it will remain unused, save for my personal living quarters in the left wing of the second floor. I have sold the company I owned and cut myself off from most of my contacts, with the exception of a group of mediums over which I preside; but my job will remain as long as I can reliably perform my duties, for it is the only part of my life I truly love.

At a meeting I ordered, I have explained to my group my predicament and my new purpose, shared my visions and my dreams, and explained my theories; and they all swore to help me not out of loyalty, but because there is so much to gain for them - for all of us - if I succeed. Proving that souls exist, that the afterlife is real, would be the greatest scientific achievement in the history of mankind.

I was visited by a gengar today.

I felt a mix of relief and fear when it first floated through my open window as I sat at the central island of my kitchen. When it turned to

me, smiling in that creepy way only gengar knows how, I thought that Death had decided to grant me mercy and ease my suffering, and my resolve was shaken when the thought crossed my mind that it was too soon and I was not ready.

The gengar did not kill me. Standing by the window, it looked around as if to inspect my living space, and once it was satisfied with whatever information it was trying to gather, its disturbing stare did not leave me. I tried speaking to it, but it remained obstinately silent, and fear did not let me approach. It left through the same window it had come through when the sun set, and my dreams that night were no longer haunted.

The gengar returned every day for about a week. It visited me in my room once, and jumped onto my bed as I was at my desk writing my journal. There was something of amusement in its otherworldly smile, and I could swear that I found joy in its slanted eyes; and I tried speaking to it again, but it remained silent. I have grown accustomed to this strange company, and I believe that as long as I make no moves to prove myself a threat, it will make no moves to eliminate me.

The gengar spoke.

I grew the habit of sitting at my desk in the morning, taking notes on my thoughts and experiences. This is advice my doctor gave me after she convinced me to take my medication; she said it would help long-term, once I start fading, and it will be a good read for my children if I ever have any. Not that I plan to; I tried dating once upon a time, but it was difficult finding a woman who did not meet my power with derisive remarks, so what sane woman would want a thirty year-old medium with dementia?

The gengar joined me every morning as I sat, sometimes standing by the window, sometimes on the bed, and ever observing me with its maliciously impenetrable grin. A wave of frustration took me as I

reflected upon the meaning of my past visions still, and I grunted; and the gengar turned to me, frowned, and shook its head. "You don't get it," I said. "I'm losing most of my mind because of a disease I can't control, and I had visions I don't understand that are making me lose whatever is left."

Then, it canted its whole body to the side, and said, "Maybe I understand." He had a low, raspy voice, surprisingly pleasant to the ear.

He jolted when my pen dropped. "Can you understand me?" he asked, and I nodded; and I'm not sure I was the most astonished of us two. Unfortunately, the possibility that I understood him must have scared him as he immediately vanished without saying more.

Once the surprise faded, I was elated. I could talk to a pokemon! I have no doubt that this is a unique experience across all of history, and though I was eager to talk more, my excitement was soon replaced with countless questions and the fear that the gengar may not return. I carried on with my occupations for the day, figuring out what experiments I could conduct that could prove the existence of souls until late at night. I found myself disappointed to notice the gengar didn't return, and hoping he would.

I have no doubts that I could speak with the gengar because of my power.

Is not this what gengar are - personifications of death? It should then be no surprise that I, being capable of talking to the dead, am capable of talking to Death itself, although it seems that It did not expect that. I wonder what the gengar thinks of me now that he has seen I can understand him. Will he kill me? Was that the reason why he visited me at first? If not, then why? What could possibly be going through the giant head of the most mysterious of all pokemon?

However fortuitous his arrival was, it blessed me with an answer.

If the story that gengar are former humans is true, then I know where my research must go. Ghost pokemon are rumoured to be the souls of the dead. That is what my visions meant. The hands I saw were cursory visits from haunter, my friends, who guided me in my dismay not towards the light, but towards their darkness. A darkness for which I long.

I must then investigate pokemon. They are living, intelligent creatures - more intelligent than humans for some of them. It would be delusional of us to think we were the only species burdened with souls. They are abundantly found and, with the position of power we have, I may be able to conduct experiments I would not be able to on humans. I hope it won't come to it, but what I am investigating is essentially the process of dying, and there may be sacrifices to be made for the sake of science and salvation.

The gengar did show up every day after that fortuitous event, although he would not respond to my prodding. Sitting in a corner of my bedroom that I now considered his, he watched me work in silence, waiting in stealth when I had to leave it or received company. I made sure to keep his presence secret from all, including the mediums in my group; it shall be a test to make sure that they really could communicate with me from the afterlife after I safeguard my soul and pass.

A week after he first spoke and I was ready to go to bed, I invited him to sit on the bed with me. To my surprise, he accepted, and we finally talked.

"I want to talk to you," I said. "I am a medium, and I can talk to the dead; I believe that is why I can understand what you say."

"Is that what you believe this is?" was his reply.

The answer caught me off-guard, and bugs me to this day still; but I decided not to press the topic. Being so close to a pokemon so powerful was terrifying and exhilarating, and the idea that he could

end my life at one flick of his otherworldly tongue had me second-guessing every one of my words.

"Why do you want to talk to me?" he asked.

It took me a moment to formulate my answer. "I'm going to die" is what I went for, but he didn't seem impressed. "I have dementia. I plan on committing suicide while I am still myself. I would appreciate some company in my final weeks. And there are questions I want to ask you."

The gengar frowned. It was a bizarre sight, watching its giant mouth bend upside down, and frightening - but in the end, he smiled again.

"You seek my company, yet so many humans have visited you."

"These are for work," I said. "They are not friends. They don't care that I'm going to die."

"Am I your friend?"

"I would like you to be."

The gengar frowned again, then looked down.

"I will keep you company," he said, and a smile brightened my face, "but you must promise me never to ask about our powers."

"I promise."

I must admit that, at the time, I hadn't even considered asking the gengar about pokemon powers. I wasn't sure if I had understood that they purposely keep them secret from us, or if it had simply slipped my mind, but I had no care for the problem. Saying I wanted the company was a bit desperate but, in retrospect, painfully accurate. I didn't realise it until very late, but I did feel lonely.

As promised, the gengar conversed with me. Reluctantly at first, and sitting away from me; but I could tell that, over time, he found joy in our conversations, and although he kept himself physically separate from me, he willingly came to sit on my bed come night. I gave my best efforts to treat him with utmost respect and pay attention to what I could understand of his body language, and I believe he reciprocated the attention. After only about a week, I felt like we had become genuine friends.

Our conversations were mundane at first. I told him my life story, how I was born into wealth of two parents who cared about me less than they cared about their cars, and how when I was a kid I had made friends with every pokemon I came across because animals seemed to carefully avoid me and my elder sister kept herself away from the house. I told him of the day I realised I could talk to the dead, when I found my dear sister dead in her room, having hung herself at the occasion of a visit after a fight with my parents, and her voice told me to stay calm and that, even if she had never had a chance to show it, she loved me. I told him that, a few months only after this, my father died murdered by a group of activists who were protesting against his latest drilling project, and that my mother shot herself in the head the day after learning of his death, leaving me with an oversized mansion, an oil empire, and a suicide letter that ordered me to keep the company afloat and retain the mansion's staff. I showed him the letter and explained how it was my most cherished possession - not because it was all I had left of my parents, but because it was the only time they had acknowledged me.

"You lived a violent life," he said.

And I said, "No. I lived violent deaths."

Then, he told me about his life; how he evolved from ghastly quickly and became a powerful haunter within the forest, and over time, fought to claim the entire territory as his own. He told me of the wisps of the Gloss Forest, and how haunter and gengar are able to toy with a living creature's senses. He refused to let me know the

exact boundaries of this power, but he explained that if he wanted, he could, without touching me, make me live through pain so intense that it would kill me; or deprive me of my sense of smell; or make me believe that he was a floating desk. "Illusions are cheap," he said, "for the eyes are most easily duped. Trust your ears, they are the only ones we cannot fool."

He still refused to explain what had drawn him to me one day.

"Tell me," I said, "is it true that Ghost pokemon are the souls of the dead?"

"No," he said. "But we are what the living have that is closest to death. And Fire-type pokemon are what is closest to life."

"What do you mean?"

At that moment, he stood from the bed, and walked to the window, looking outside.

"Of all of us who have souls, theirs are the brightest," he said. "So bright that they breach the barrier between the spiritual and the material. If you seek to prove the existence of souls, then Fire pokemon are your answer. And I believe you humans are already aware of it."

I felt like my very soul had become so bright it also breached the barrier, and my heart became warm and cozy. From that moment, I knew what I had to do.

"Will you help me?" I asked, after I told the gengar my plans.

"I will lend you my kin," he said, "and my forest. They will assist you. All I ask in return is that if you must kill, you observe proper respect for the bodies you keep, and once your research is complete, that you return them to their loved ones. Too few of us have the privilege of a family; we should not deny it to those who do."

I promised, and we set to work. I drafted a quick project plan, with the goal to prove the physical existence of the inner flame, and that it is extinguished with the pokemon's death. Finding evidence for that would be sufficient to prove that souls exist, for the inner flame is the soul for Fire pokemon; and with that, I could find a way to rescue the inner flame before it vanishes. Then, I could rescue my soul before it vanishes.

So began Project Medium.

It took two years to build the laboratories needed to begin the experiments. Gengar gave me a location within the forest that was safe enough, but not too far from the border where we would be picking Fire pokemon to drag in. The other laboratory I decided to build outside of town, near the industrial zone, and disguise it as a biology lab. It took a lot of paperwork, a lot of money, and a lot of time; and with my disease progressing quickly, I found it difficult to stomach all this work by myself. The funds left me by my parents and from the sale of my company were insufficient, and I took more loans than I could ever repay, but it is a necessary sacrifice - as are the lives we are going to take. I give my word to all the pokemon caught in this noble endeavour that we will treat them with the respect they deserve.

My medium group volunteered to be a part of this, and I also hired biologists sworn to secrecy under penalty of death. The mediums will be the ones handling acquiring test subjects - I cannot trust hired scientists for this. Keeping this process away from police eyes will be difficult, but I believe we can do it thanks to the assistance from Gengar and his kin who will provide cover for the murders. It pains me that I must do this, but I will do everything I can to save my soul.

Experiments will begin soon, but I am pressed for time; my symptoms have been getting worse and medication is unhelpful. I fear I may not see the end of this project.

It has been half a year since the opening of the labs, and there have been no results.

We have caught and killed three pokemon so far. Autopsies proved that there was no change after death, and visual inspections of the moment of passing failed to pick up on anything - even from our allies the haunter. We are keeping the bodies in our main lab, and I will make good on my promise to return them once our mission is done.

Gengar is now spending his entire days with me, often helping me when my memory fails. Our conversations continue, although nothing of importance is said. I find myself enjoying his company far more than I had anticipated. I wish I had been able to talk to all pokemon, but it seems I can only talk to his evolution line. My childhood would have been less difficult with such company.

I think my power may be in decline. I failed to give a client who visited me an answer about his dead relative, and although I could improvise a satisfactory reply, I am annoyed at myself for having to lie. I can wait no further, and must carry on the promise I made to myself when I found out about my disease, four years ago. I have left instructions for my group to continue Project Medium until its completion, and specific orders to respect my will and Gengar's will to return the remains to their loved ones. There are zealous people among mine; some I fear too zealous.

Gengar's smile disappeared when I told him. He even closed his mouth, which I wasn't sure he was able to.

"To whom will I keep company when you are gone?" was his first question.

"I will need you to stay and oversee the project," I said. "I don't fully trust my people anymore."

"But you trust me?"

The question caught me off-guard, but my answer was immediate. Yes, I did. He seemed surprised by it, but simply nodded with a faint smile.

"I will miss my job," I said.

"Why were you doing this?" he asked. His question surprised me - he had never asked me about my work or powers before. "Talking to the dead for people who believed you couldn't."

I shrugged. "I just wanted to make people happy. If they came to me, then they must have believed I could, at least to some extent. Everyone always has regrets when it comes to the dead, and I helped them lift those regrets. I gave them answers they could not have obtained otherwise."

"So you were an altruist."

"I don't know. I have this power, why not make use of it? I did charge people for it, sometimes a lot. I don't feel like I'm a benefactor. I just offer a service that happens to help people."

"I see." Gengar lowered his head, and I'm not sure what went through it at that moment; but when he looked up again, his eyes were shaking. "How do you plan on killing yourself?"

"I will hang myself like my sister and my mom did."

He frowned, as if confused. "But you will suffer."

"Only for a time. At the very least I will die as myself."

"Is that really that important to you?"

"I suppose not. In the end, I couldn't salvage my soul. I still don't want to progressively abandon myself until I can't feel myself leaving anymore."

"I understand."

He looked down and disappeared.

This will be the last entry in this journal.

Everything is set for my death. I will hang myself here, above the bed. With Gengar's help, I will condemn this wing of the mansion by covering the door in metal. He promised it would not be an issue for him, although I don't see how he will do it, but I trust him. My remains will stay here until the mansion crumbles. Other mediums will cover my death and ensure nothing happens to the mansion.

I have entrusted my full diary to my doctor, to whom I owe a great deal - a version of it that omits everything related to Gengar and Project Medium. She has helped me make these past few years more tolerable. She has guided me through a process most people refuse to properly go through. I wish there were anything I could do in return, but she has turned down my offer to use my power for her and asked me to take care of myself instead. I did, to the best of my ability; and to her I offer my sincerest apologies for failing to fulfil her request.

My hands tremble as I sit on my bed, writing these lines. Facing death is a lot scarier than I imagined, and my resolve not as strong.

Gengar joins me. He sits by my side, closer than he has ever been - I could raise my hand and pet his head, but I opt to remain immobile. He has never allowed me to touch him, and I shall be respectful until the end.

"Let me kill you," he says.

I am not sure how to react at first. My heart beats faster. The shaking of my hands has become visible.

"Why?" I ask.

He smiles. "Have you heard the saying that gengar is the ghost of a human who takes lives looking for a companion?"

"I have. I don't believe in it. I don't think humans are strong enough to become pokemon after death."

"What if I told you some are, and you are one of them?"

The idea is appealing. But... "I appreciate the compliment," I say. "But you said yourself that ghost pokemon are what the living are that is closest to death. Therefore, they cannot be death, or dead."

Gengar smiles again, and chuckles. "You still have your wit. After all this time, you remember what I said when we first talked. You will die yourself fully. You need not worry." Then, his smile vanishes. "Let me kill you," he repeats. His usual creepy smile is gone, replaced with a frown that refuses to look at me. "I cannot bear the thought of you suffocating and being in pain. When you go to sleep tonight, I will remove your pain, and I will kill you. You will not feel a thing and you will die peacefully."

I take the chance to write down this exchange to consider the proposal. There is a unique form of sadness in his eyes. Something I wouldn't have expected to see from a gengar - nay, from a pokemon.

"Very well. Let's do that. Can I write this before I sleep?"

"Of course. I will put your journal back into your drawer for you."

"Where will you go once I'm gone?"

Gengar looked away. "I will oversee your project if I can. But I cannot promise how long. It will be lonely without you, and the humans don't know about me. They will not trust me."

I raise my hand and, for the first time since we met, I touch him.

He jolts slightly when my fingers make contact with his head. He is warm, and his fur soft, somewhere between a cat and a dog. He

doesn't move away or swat my hand off of him. Instead, he looks at me with lost eyes, as if it was the first time in his life, however long it has been, that somebody touched him with affection.

Night has come, and I no longer feel anxious or hesitant. We have condemned the door using two aptly-sized metal plates I had someone make that Gengar welded with fire before going through the door and welding the other side. I spent a lot of time cleaning while he did that, and preparing my room. As I lay in silence on my bed, the noose hangs above me like a reminder of what this mansion had seen, almost mockingly tempting me to use it and join my estranged family.

I opt to lay on my sheets rather than inside them, and Gengar closes the door before joining me on the bed.

"Do you feel ready?" he asks.

"Yes," I lie. I find myself relieved that he cannot read the words I write. Who is ever ready to die?

I lay down, my journal in hand; and to my absolute surprise, Gengar lays down with me, turns around, and embraces me with his short arms.

"I will miss you," I say.

"I doubt it," he replies. "But I will."

We spend a few minutes cuddling, the first real display of affection I've had in my life - and it comes from a pokemon many believe is incapable of emotion. As I lay there, comfortable in the arms of my executioner and knowing that my life is about to end, I come to a shocking realisation.

The embrace of death is not cold.

Chapter 58

Agnes wiped the tears from her cheeks.

She sat on a soft chair in the commissioner's office. Ears perked and waiting for more, I sat on her walker, directly in front of her, Topa beneath me keeping it in place with her tails.

The white walls of the large room we were in showered us in an uncomfortably bright light reflected from the numerous powerful neons spread across the ceiling. Isolated in the back wall to Agnes's left, a lone window covered by crimson curtains occluded the orange hues of the setting sun. A brown leather chair waited under it, tucked under the centre of a long desk. The desk's striped wood shone brightly under the assault of artificial light, burdened only by two joined monitors and a desktop to the left of the chair, and took a downward right angle to join the floor, hiding the wall behind it and the legs of its owner. The two side walls too were hidden, but by large metallic cabinets similar to the ones I had seen in the commissioner's office at school. Two simple metallic chairs waited between them, widely spaced as if to make room for a third one between them.

Said third chair was the one Agnes sat on, behind the desk, as she took a deep breath and finished rubbing her cheeks free of the remnants of her tears.

The commissioner leaned forward, an arm extended, and Agnes handed him the journal back.

"Are you all right?" he asked with a neutral tone and a flat stare.

"I am," Agnes said. "My apologies. I didn't expect this would get to me."

"I can't say I blame you." The commissioner threw himself back in his chair and tossed the journal near his keyboard with a sigh. "Not a pleasant read" -he nodded towards her with respect- "especially read out loud."

"Do you think it's true? Any of it?"

"I'm not sure. The part where he talks to a gengar is too far-fetched, in my opinion - probably his growing dementia - but everything else makes sense and aligns with what we know so far. We'll know more when Doctor Belish returns."

Agnes's gaze pushed a dejected sigh out of her as it fell to the floor. It met mine as she peered at her walker, then escaped with a whimper as I chirped towards her, and I exchanged worried glances with Topa. Our human sniffed loudly, looked away, and peered at her walker again.

A grunt coming from the desk made us three jolt and snap our gazes towards it. The commissioner rested his forehead on his fingers, elbow supported by his desk and thumb rubbing his cheek. His chair was turned away from his computer at an almost right angle and faced us directly with a frown between frustration and concern.

"A single individual should not be able to mount a hidden scientific operation under our noses like this," he grumbled. "We are blind. I will need to investigate how that was possible."

"Medium circles," Agnes replied in a whisper. "Do we even know anything about them?"

"No. Another investigation, then."

Another grunt, defeated this time, escaped the commissioner.

"Your parents will be here later today," he said, looking up at Agnes. "I will interrogate them myself, but I would like you to be here."

She challenged his gaze with wavering eyes, then nodded slowly. "Understood. I will be. I suspect they will want to talk to me, especially my mother. I w..." her voice trailed off and her eyes fell to the floor with a weary sigh. "I need to talk to them anyway."

"Something on your mind?"

Agnes hesitated. "Yes," she finally said in a whisper.

Her eyes crept down from the commissioner's and sought refuge on the floor. She opened her mouth, and knocks came from the door.

"Come in," the commissioner called.

Doctor Belish hurried in. Ilma stopped the door from slamming close with her tail, then guided it to a more gentle close.

"Bad news, I presume," the commissioner said.

"Sort of. Everything from the journal checks out. The body we found was indeed the Founder's, and he did own Agnes's family mansion before it was sold at an auction to cover his crippling debt. His sister killed herself, his father was murdered by an anti-oil group, and his mother shot herself the day after. He was never reported as missing, but supposedly sold his mansion without explaining why. I don't know why there was no investigation there."

"So many failures on our part. This is not acceptable."

Doctor Belish turned to Agnes. "Have you read the journal yet?"

"Yes," she whispered.

The colonel stared at her with a confused frown, then walked around the desk, skipping right past me without granting me a single glance, and knelt before her.

"What's wrong?" he asked, eyes locked on hers. "Did the journal get to you?"

"It did," Agnes confessed with a blush. "I just told the commissioner I wanted to talk to my parents after they are questioned."

"Something that rubbed you the wrong way?"

My human took a deep breath, which escaped her in a depressed sigh, and she nodded.

"I can relate to the Founder."

There was a silence. The two policemen stared at her with a confounded frown, but Topa and I peered at her with sorry eyes.

"The part where he mentioned his mother's suicide letter hit me particularly hard," she continued. "He was abandoned by his parents because they would rather focus on their jobs than spend any time with him. He's grown up without any sort of love except for the pokemon he befriended. The only companionship he found was in a gengar of all pokemon, and he let his only friend ever kill him because he didn't want to continue suffering."

A short whimper made her jolt, and she sobbed as she turned to me. My heart skipped a beat when I read the distress in her eyes. Her forming tears reminded me of the conversation we had when she was still struggling with her recovery and her strength was faltering, and just like then, there was nothing I could do to comfort her.

I hopped down from the chair part of her walker to jump onto her lap.

"I see," Doctor Belish said. "I understand why the journal got to you, then. I suppose that's what you want to talk to your parents about."

"I'd rather be alone for that," she said.

"Naturally," the commissioner replied.

The colonel stood. "So, Agnes, what do you think of the journal?"

"The inner flame," she said after a delay. "It was about the inner flame all along. I don't know how we didn't understand that sooner. The fact that all victims were Fire-type pokemon should have made it obvious."

She took a deep breath, sat upright with a pained wince, and looked at me.

"Is it true?" she asked. "Does the inner flame really exist?" Topa nodded. "Is it really... your soul?"

I exchanged confused gazes with the ninetales, who canted her head to the side. I shook mine, looking at Agnes again.

"Is there no link at all?" I denied again, and Agnes's shoulders dropped. "Then that research was all for nothing. He could have never proven the existence of souls."

"He couldn't have known that," Doctor Belish said. "He was desperate. Maybe even delusional."

"About that. Why did he say his mother hanged herself? I thought only his sister did."

"Dementia," the doctor replied with confidence. "He probably forgot how she died and his brain made up memories to fit his situation. It's not impossible, especially if he was under emotional stress."

"So he didn't die fully himself either. His entire project is a failure. All he did was murder innocent pokemon."

"Failure or not, he did murder innocent pokemon indeed," the commissioner said in a sharp tone. "He cannot pay for his crimes, but we can convict the people involved in his project. Belish?"

The doctor gave his superior a stern nod. "We know where the laboratory he built is. I've called in special services, we can storm it tomorrow."

"Sir."

Agnes groaned as she stood, her upper body wavering insecurely as she held herself up with her walker. I securely landed on the floor after being catapulted from her lap and stood by her side.

"Requesting permission to join the raid together with Ruby and Topa."

"You understand that this not recon, don't you?" the commissioner asked. "We are not going there to find information. We're going there to capture people. There will be fighting. There might be casualties."

"I understand. I need to do this. We need to do this."

Her gaze, sharpened by resolve, brushed over Topa and me. The ninetales barked with confidence and sat on our human's feet, staring the commissioner down, and I inflated my chest in pride - but my gaze was on Ilma, who intently stared at the ninetales by my side with an undecipherable frown.

"Very well. You will be part of my squad, then. I will lend you Dante as I have for the past few missions. Your rank will return to sergeant - your leadership is no longer necessary, and we will have several commanding officers with us."

"Yes, sir."

The commissioner smiled. "If I may comment on it, you did a mighty fine job. You recovered quickly after losing control as well. You have my commendation."

"Thank you, sir."

The man gave her a few taps on the shoulder that nearly threw her off-balance and returned to his desk with a large smile. Our eyes turned to Ilma after she let out a stern bark, and Doctor Belish groaned with resignation.

He turned to the commissioner. "Sir, the Trokair family is waiting in an interrogation room."

Both policemen then turned to Agnes, who returned a resolved stare.

"Let's go," she said. "Once the interrogation is done, can I have the room alone with my parents?"

"Of course. Just don't let them leave after you."

Agnes nodded, then peered at me. "I'm sorry, Ruby, but you and Topa will have to wait outside once the interrogation is done. I need to have that conversation with my parents on my own."

My eyes wavered as they scanned hers, the stillness of her resolve unbothered by the tremors of doubt. For a moment, her mouth widened into a faint smile and her eyes softened, but returned to their focus as she looked back up.

"I will be fine," Agnes said. "Thank you. Commissioner, after you."

As we walked towards the interrogation room, Agnes's heart began beating faster, and her hold of her walker became so uncertain she nearly tripped after entering the public side of the police station. She smiled at me and thanked me for catching the slipping walker, took a deep breath, and steadied her grip and her step; but her heart only accelerated.

We stopped before the entrance, and Belish and Ilma left to go to the secure interview room.

"Are you ready?" the commissioner asked.

Agnes heaved a focused sigh. Despite her look of shaking resolve, her head was tilted down and her hands still trembled.

"Yes," she whispered. "May I ask questions if I have any?"

"I would advise you remain silent through the interrogation. Do not let your personal feelings get in the way of due process."

"I understand, sir. Can Ruby and Topa come with me?"

"Of course. Let's go."

He opened the door and stepped in first. Topa went next, then me, and Agnes followed last.

The interrogation room was a small bland room. Directly to the left of the entrance was a large one-way window I knew gave into the room Doctor Belish had gone to, and the other walls were void of any decoration. Besides the single wooden desk in its exact centre, the floor was similarly barren, decorated only by the abusively strong lights coming from the oppressingly low ceiling.

Sir and Madam sat together on the far side of the table, dressed in formal clothing. Although Agnes's mother looked around with apprehension, her husband kept an unreadable face and patiently stared at two empty plastic bottles on the table. He moved not a hair when the commissioner entered, but snapped his head towards the door when his daughter showed up.

"Agnes," her mother whimpered.

She stood. Agnes slammed her walker down in front of herself, glaring at Madam with anger in her eyes; but it was Sir pulling on his wife's sleeve that forced her to sit back down.

"Agnes," he said in a flat tone.

"Father," she groaned.

The two stared at each other for a second until a warm smile brightened Sir's face.

"How are you doing?" he asked, his voice carrying the mellow torment of an estranged family.

"I'm fine," Agnes replied. Although her tone was still stark, there was no frown to cover her eyes. "I'm recovering - slowly, but I am. Where is Melissa?"

Sir's smile widened. "I am happy to hear that. Melissa is at home supervised by a close friend of ours. When we got ourselves ready to leave, she said she would only come to see you when you wanted it, and then she locked herself in her room and wouldn't say anything. Finding someone to watch her on such short notice was not easy."

"That does sound like her. It is probably best anyway, at least for now. How is she doing?"

"She's... struggling. Being apart from you has been difficult. Chatting online or on the phone isn't quite the same as having you there with her, and the visits not being possible has seriously affected her. At least she's not worried about your health as much anymore. And she misses Topa."

"I can understand."

Madam looked up. "Agnes, you-"

"No," Agnes abruptly said. "I don't want to hear anything from you."

Madam's lips shook for a brief moment, then deformed themselves into a furious frown. Sir put a hand on her shoulder, and as she opened her mouth, she winced in pain; and she remained silent afterwards, her husband's grip never letting go.

"Why have we been subpoenaed?" Sir asked, turning to the commissioner.

"I'm surprised you haven't brought your lawyer with you," the latter said. He walked to the table and carried the only unoccupied chair to Agnes.

Sir frowned. "Had I known we were being accused of something, I would have brought him with us, yes."

"You are not suspects, at least not yet. I need to ask you a few questions, and I need you to answer truthfully. It's about the people who attacked your daughter."

Agnes's father's traits morphed to a transient expression of loathing. "Whatever I can do to help catch these bastards."

His eyes momentarily softened as he watched her struggle to sit. While I opted to sit on her lap - and she welcomed me with an abundance of pets - Topa chose to sit by her side instead, and the commissioner moved to stand to her right, fists on the table.

"We have traced the murders back to the previous owner of your mansion", the commissioner announced.

Sir's eyes widened. "That can't be. I bought it at a private auction two decades ago. That had nothing to do with any murders."

"The man who owned the building and land is behind it all. What do you know of him?"

"Nothing. I never even met the owner."

"Then who auctioned the mansion?"

Sir's gaze fled to the floor, carefully avoiding all others in the room - including, to my surprise, his wife's, who sought to meet his eyes with a confused and anxious frown. Remarkably, Agnes kept the same impenetrable face as the commissioner, but never so much as glanced at her mother.

"I bought it on the black market," Sir whispered. "I know nothing of the house's history except that the previous owners sold it to cover debt."

Madam gasped in horror. "You bought a black market house? I was pregnant! What if the mansion was dangerous?"

"It wasn't, love, I swear."

"I will need the auctioneer's name, location, or any other information to identify them. We'll deal with the black market situation another day. What were you told about the house?"

Sir heaved a despondent sigh and turned his head to stare at the table.

"Only what I told you. The auctioneer never even visited it, but swore that it was safe. I did visit it several times after buying it to make sure there was nothing that could slightly inconvenience my wife. The only weird part was the second floor's left wing. It was condemned behind a metal slab."

"Did it not occur to you that you should investigate?" the commissioner asked.

Sir raised fury-driven eyes towards him and gritted his teeth. "Of course it did. And I tried, but Alcina wouldn't let me get any close to it. She was scared."

"Who's Alcina?"

Sir peered at his daughter's ninetales. "Topa's mother."

The commissioner and I both glanced at her, who quietly sat by our trainer's feet. Her slightly raised head brought her ears forward in focus on the conversation, and it took her a second to notice she was being looked at. She peeked at me, smiled, and returned to her previous stance.

"And you still moved us in with you?" Madam cried. Tears had started falling from her eyes. "You knew it was dangerous!"

"I knew it wasn't," Sir said, finally looking at his wife. "I asked Alcina. She promised it wasn't. But she stood watch of that door since the day we moved in. I remember when Agnes was little, she wouldn't let her near the left wing either. Not even Topa, not even her son. I don't know what she sensed behind there, but it made her uncomfortable and she didn't want any of us to be exposed to it."

An almost imperceptible sigh stiffened Agnes's body at the mention of Topa's son, and she glanced at her pokemon with worried eyes; but Topa, faultlessly vigilant, kept her head high and her ears forward.

"Why did you not contact police?" the commissioner asked. "I would have been happy to investigate for you and keep your family safe."

"Because of my family," Sir growled. "You don't understand. My wife was near the end of her pregnancy. Alcina was near the end of her life. I was just looking to get away from the big town and the attention we got in there. I didn't care about anything other than keeping my wife safe, and if Alcina said the mansion was safe, then with all my soul I believe it was."

Agnes looked down at me with a gentle smile. "Did you ever feel anything from the door?" she asked.

I shook my head. Agnes asked the same question to Topa, who also denied feeling anything, and looked up at the commissioner. Frowning absently as his eyes debated the testimonial for themselves, he stared back at the ninetales with a questioning frown, his occasional glances to me sending anxious shivers down my spine. After what felt like several minutes of silence, he returned to his neutral stance and challenged his suspect's gaze.

"So," he said. "Your alibi is that you broke the law to purchase a mansion illegally put up for sale, and your only witness is a now deceased ninetales who somehow sensed things that your current ninetales and your vulpix - one remarkably powerful, if Ilma is to be

believed, and one for whom I have immense respect, by the way - have never had any inkling of. Am I getting this right?"

Sir's worry turned to an irate frown. He stood, sending a deafening screech through the room as his chair bit into the floor.

"Arrest me if you want, but let my wife go," he said, proudly towering over his fallen seat. "Do whatever you think is necessary for your investigation. But I swear to you, on my honour and on Alcina's memory, that neither my wife nor I had anything to do with the murders. I was only looking for a chance to get a little bit of privacy, and buying a house would inevitably have brought attention to us."

A tense silence filled the room. Though my eyes chased after Topa, hers seemed to avoid mine, fixated on what she could see of her owner above the table. The commissioner quietly shook his head, a disapproving stare riveted on Sir, and Madam too could not escape the gravity of his guilt, glaring at him with shaking wet eyes. The smell of sweat accompanied the floral perfumes that Agnes's parents wore, almost completely overpowering them.

"I believe you," the commissioner finally said. Sir remained tense. "I will need all the information you can give me on anyone who has been associated with the house since you started looking into it, including if you can the names of the other guests of the auction."

"I will give you everything I can."

"Dad," Agnes said.

Her voice trembled insecurely. Both adult men in the room turned eyes to her - her father looking at her with pity, and the commissioner scrutinizing her every movement - and she took a deep breath.

"We did investigate the forbidden wing," she continued, carefully measuring each of her words.

"You did?" he asked. His eyes widened enormously, shivering with an emotion I would have never expected from a man who exuded so much control: fear. "Are you okay? Were Ruby and Topa with you? Are they okay?"

"They were with me, and we're fine. We had a whole police squad. I cannot tell you what we found because that is still classified for the investigation. I just... I wanted you to know that you were right. There really was no danger."

Agnes and her father exchanged insecure gazes for a second while her mother desperately tried to catch a glimpse in her direction. In the corner of my eye, I caught a subtle nod from the commissioner, who cleared his throat.

"That will be all for now," he said. "I will send someone later to take a written statement. You may not return to the mansion yet, but I will personally let you know when you can. Stay here."

"Can my wife return to our home? I don't want to leave Melissa alone."

"She can once she has given her statement."

"Thank you. I will stay and provide whatever assistance I can for your investigation."

He stood - then froze when Agnes raised a hand.

"Sit down," she said. "You are not free to go yet, and I need to talk to you, and to Mother."

She took the excuse of attempting to readjust the position of her walker to look at me with a crestfallen face. I nodded quietly, stood, and Topa and I followed the commissioner out of the room. We met Belish at the door, together with Ilma, who addressed a sympathetic smile to the ninetales but said nothing.

"Let me know when you're done, Agnes," the commissioner said.

"I will, Sir. Thank you."

I watched the door to the interrogation room close with a heavy heart, enclosing my beloved trainer once more with two people who had repeatedly proved themselves unworthy of her love.

Chapter 59

The commissioner set the date of the raid to the following Monday in the early afternoon, when it was likely that most of the scientists working in the laboratory would be there.

When Agnes walked out of the interrogation room, her brow obscured part of her eyes, and the weight of her frowning mouth kept her head pointing to the floor. She whispered an order to Topa and me and we followed her home, wordlessly questioning each other on the meaning of her silence; but she never broke out of it and laid motionless on her bed once relieved of the burden of her walker. Rakuen couldn't get any words out of her except the request she be left alone. Although she didn't turn down my forced cuddles, she didn't say anything to me as I laid on her chest and she absently scratched the back of my head. She remained inconsolable all weekend, and only regained a resemblance of focus when Doctor Belish himself paid her an impromptu visit on Sunday night and gathered Topa, Agnes, and me to our human's room to discuss the raid.

Our squad would be nearly the same as the one we had when we assaulted the underground lab, with two exceptions: Topa and I would be taking point. Pico and Derek would be part of a squad of snipers deployed around the buildings to eliminate any stragglers, and the commissioner would not be accompanying us into battle, for his role was to supervise the assault. Dante would still be Agnes's mount, and Doctor Belish promised that he and Ilma would personally oversee our squad and safety.

The battle, Belish said, would be a landslide victory, but he advised us to ignore that fact and remain cautious lest we become casualties in it. Seven other squads with compositions similar to ours would storm the building all at once, each of the squads having a Will-O-Wisp capable pokemon with them to protect them from ambushes by Ghost pokemon. They all had their own purpose and battle plan, and

ours was to infiltrate the underground portion of the laboratory that dealt with Project Medium. Ilma guaranteed that she would be sufficient to defeat any number of pokemon thrown our way, and I shared the confidence she had in herself; when saying that, however, she gave Topa a trembling glance and said that she hoped the ninetales would get to show us the true extent of her power. Topa grunted, shook her head, and turned to me; and the vaporeon pursued the matter no further.

I slept with a heavy heart. The fact that Ilma had not mentioned me as an asset in the coming battle had left my pride wounded, even though I agreed with her assessment; my true power since the training with Articuno had yet to be tested, and she could not mention my improvement without raising suspicions with the other pokemon present with us. She had no idea that Topa knew about Articuno, and Topa had no idea Ilma knew. The thought brought me to tears as I realised I was the unwilling middle ground in a twisted game of telephone between the two evolved pokemon, and that I was powerless to stop it.

At 8am on the day of the raid, police began the stealthy evacuation of neighbouring buildings through channels invisible from the target building. Workers were instructed to leave their cars parked and were funnelled out through inconspicuous vehicles. Once evacuation was done, the different squads took their positions in preparation for the breach.

The sun was high in the sky as Agnes was being kitted in one of the now vacant offices, Dante sitting by her side and patiently waiting with his modified saddle on his back. The other pokemon in our group, including the quiet sandslash, were grouped around Ilma and being briefed, and only Topa and I were excluded.

Derek approached in full body armour and helmet, carrying a rifle longer than he was tall and with a large scope. Pico followed him, trotting behind his trainer with a gentle wag of his enormous tail.

He saluted Doctor Belish. "Colonel."

"At ease. Is your squad ready?"

"All sniper groups in position. The captain is waiting for your orders."

"Great. Transmit these orders then: once the ground troops breach, you have permission to fire at will. The goal is to disable, but if elimination is required, then you are permitted to kill."

"Roger." Derek pointed to Agnes. "May I..."

"After the raid," Belish replied with a sharp tone. Derek jolted and audibly gulped. "Get to your positions, we are starting soon. Dismissed."

"Understood, Sir."

The young soldier snapped a trembling salute briefly returned by the colonel and turned around. As he was about to leave, his eyes were drawn to Agnes, and surreptitiously moved towards the sky while his chin fell. My trainer replied with a large smile and subtle nod, and Derek left grinning widely. Topa and I too exchanged gazes, but of confusion - whatever Derek and Agnes had just silently agreed to, we were not part of it.

"Good morning," Ilma said.

Her full armour once again made me jolt as she approached, a feeling of naive terror shaking my body down to the tip of my tails. Standing resolutely still, Topa seized the nightmarish vaporeon up and down, then canted her head to the side.

"You are indeed terrifying," she said. "Somehow more than in a dark, ghost-infested forest."

"I would hope so," Ilma replied with a giggle. "That's half the point of this armour." She looked around and let out a tired sigh. "It looks like we're getting ready to breach. Are you ready?"

"I would say I am. I was under the impression that the other teams would also get pokemon capable of using Will-O-Wisp, but I have not seen any. What gives?"

"Given this is a highly secret operation, the trainers cannot be involved if they are not part of police. If both trainer and pokemon agreed to it, the pokemon were requisitioned and placed under the temporary leadership of the squad leader. Their roles are only to use Will-O-Wisp anyway."

Topa frowned and lowered her head, giving Ilma an accusative stare. "That did not answer my question."

"Oh? Sorry. What I was trying to say was that the pokemon are waiting inside the vans and won't be taken out until the start of the operation."

"Will they at least be protected?"

Ilma's eyes widened. "Of course they will be. They won't be participating in any fighting either."

Topa cast a quick glance at me, then nodded towards the vaporeon. Ilma shook her head with a mild frown, then smiled as she turned to me.

"What about you? Do you feel ready?"

My heart began racing, and turned my voice to a trembling mess. "Would you believe me if I said yes?"

"No," Ilma chuckled. "You would either be lying or there would be something immensely wrong with you. You are about to walk into a battle - your first battle. You should feel nervous and scared. The last thing you should feel is ready."

My eyes gravitated towards Topa. A hot feeling flushed my chest and cheeks as I stared at her poised stance and replayed her determined

voice in my head. As I snapped my head away with a huff, she walked up to me and laid her tails on my back.

"This is not my first battle," she said. "Every time I went out to capture one of the burglars, I feared for my life. It would not take much for one of them to kill me. I was not as scared after my son died, but once you were brought home, I began being more scared than I ever was. I was terrified of not making it back to you. This really is not that different - especially since it turns out the burglars are these people - the only change is that we are the ones breaking into their home this time."

For a brief moment, my anxiety was replaced with sadness, images of a lonely and depressed Topa fighting mediums in our oversized gardens flashing in my head. As I looked up to the ninetales, her gentle smile and the brushing of her tails on my back chased the images and my anxiety away.

A static noise erupted from Belish's radio, who brought it to his ear and remained silent for a few seconds.

"Roger," he said with a nod. His expression turned to focus as he turned to the squad. "Spread out! The assault is about to begin."

My heart raced again as I ran towards Agnes to take my position in the squad. A gentle poke of Ilma's tail caused me to groan, and she smiled.

"Let's do this," she said. "This is your chance to prove yourself wrong." She turned to Topa, and her expression turned sour. "The same goes to you."

The ninetales didn't reply, staring back at Ilma with a confused frown, and I had no time to say anything in return. Shouts echoed to us through the open window of the office as the other squads began the assault.

"Let's move," Belish said. "It's time to end this."

With the exception of Topa and me, the squad shouted in unison. We glanced at each other in worry, then at Agnes, but when it was our turn to run off towards our attack point, there was no anxiety in our hearts anymore - there was no time for it. The assault had begun.

Agnes's team was the last to breach the building. Our formation was similar to the one we had when progressing through the underground laboratory, except this time, Topa and I were the front line, with Pride and Ilma right behind us.

We progressed at a walking pace through the wide corridors, the metal walls carrying echoing screams of distant battles to us. With each room that we passed, a few of the soldiers accompanying us broke from the group, escorted by one of Topa's wisps and their host of pokemon with them. While most scientists surrendered quietly, some rooms led to bursts of pokemon powers that filled me with anxious energy, followed by a short series of screams and bodies being slammed against the floor or the walls.

Once all the rooms on our path had been stormed, there were no soldiers remaining in our group - only Agnes, Sean, Doctor Belish, Sergeant Anish, and us pokemon.

"It's time," Belish said.

We walked past an elevator and burst open a door labelled "staff only", revealing a poorly lit spiral staircase that led down.

"Ruby," Agnes whispered.

I nodded and summoned a wisp as the humans shouldered their rifles. The gentle blue light emanating from it turned the quiet corridor almost blinding, and we proceeded slowly down the path, Doctor Belish speaking into his radio to coordinate the attack with the other teams assigned to infiltration.

There was no door at the bottom of the stairs. As we walked down the final short flight, a long corridor appeared into view, eerily similar to the one we had found in the underground laboratory. Three men in casual clothes halfway through the corridor, accompanied with six haunter and three phantump, froze when they noticed us.

"What the hell?" one of them shouted. "Everyone get out! You, haunter, do your jobs!"

"Freeze!" Belish ordered. Metallic noises erupted behind me. "You are under arrest!"

The haunter glanced at one another with furrowed brows, then nodded and turned to us as the three humans and phantump fled.

"Don't look!" I shouted.

I averted my gaze just in time to avoid looking at the Ghost pokemon as their eyes enlarged and turned to a purple shade.

"Mean Look won't save you," Ilma said. She peered at me, and her look of extreme focus coupled with her terrifying armour sent my tails cowering between my legs. "Don't move. I got this."

"Be quick," Belish said as his pokemon stepped forward. "We need to chase."

The haunter frowned, and turned invisible. Topa created another two wisps and sent them forward, together with mine. As expected, the Ghost pokemon became visible again, although somewhat transparent.

"Ilma, Hydro Pump and Aqua Tail," Belish said with a poised tone.

The vaporeon's opponents had no time to react before one of them was crushed against the wall by an enormous jet of water. As it fell unconscious to the floor, Ilma dashed towards the remaining five, her tail glowing with Water unpower.

"Step left," Belish said. "Armour up. Behind you."

Ilma hopped to the left, successfully dodging a violet claw from one of the haunter. As her body and armour became covered in a dark purple substance emanating a kind of energy I was new to, two of the haunter floated behind her only to be swept aside by a single movement of Ilma's finned tail.

"Climb."

One of the haunter facing her tried to vertically swipe at her while the other one threw a dark grey ball from his position. She seized the haunter's hand with her fangs and used it to propel herself up, moving out of the way before the Shadow Ball reached her, and knocked the haunter behind her out with a stream of bubbles as she flipped over the ghost and landed on his head. He screamed in pain before he could move as another jet of water embedded his body into the concrete floor, and the last of the haunter shuddered and fled.

Behind me, Agnes emitted a whimper and slammed her hands against her ears, but the other humans remained unfazed.

Belish hurried to her side and put a hand on her shoulder. "Sergeant Trokair, are you all right?"

"I am," Agnes said within a laborious breath. She pulled on the strap of her rifle and seized it. "I thought I heard a scream. Let's go."

Despite the visible trembling of her arms, she looked ahead with a resolute frown, and Belish ordered us to keep going.

We turned the corner to find the three humans and phantump waiting on the other end of it as a front.

"Pride, use Barrier!"

The espeon hopped forward and stood before Topa and me as the three Ghost pokemon shot numerous small leaves in our direction. Pride's power formed a screen of Normal unpower energy in front of the squad, behind which we grouped for protection.

The leaf blades whizzed right past and stuck themselves deep into Pride's body.

"Pride!" Sean screamed as his pokemon collapsed. "They're using real powers!"

He dashed forward as the three phantump unleashed another volley of attacks.

"Ruby, Mud Slap!" Agnes said. "Topa, burglar!"

My thoughts raced. I remembered my fight with Flick and the shameful failure that those battles were, but I couldn't figure out what Agnes meant when she gave me the coded order. I replayed the second battle in my mind. My face clenched itself as the pain from Mud Slap came back to me. I could still see the projectile pierce through my Ember to reach me.

My eyes widened. With a deep breath, I gathered as much fire as I could within my muzzle, and unleashed a barrage of fireballs that obliterated the leaves that had been thrown my way and crashed into the walls and ceiling of the corridor. To my side, Topa's eyes had become a bright crimson colour.

"Confuse Ray!" one of the three men shouted.

The three men diverted their eyes and plugged their ears as a piercing sound erupted from Topa and drilled into my very mind, but the phantump had no such luck. Their eyes flashed red for a second, the halo of colour sipping into them and leaving the white of their eyeballs stained. Shortly after, the three Ghost pokemon began hovering uncertainly.

"Ruby, Topa, use Flamethrower!"

"Ilma, your water. Target the legs."

As the ninetales and I covered the phantump in a stream of flames, a strong wind pushed against my left side, followed by a human cry of pain. Ilma stood next to me, the remnants of a water blade escaping her muzzle. On the other end of the corridor, once the flames subsided, the three phantump laid unconscious on the floor, surrounded by a growing puddle of blood. The man on the left squirmed on the ground, his legs separated from him and splattered against the wall that faced us.

The other two cursed and fled.

My eyes were so wide that my eyelids hurt when my head slowly turned towards Ilma, the screams of the wounded man echoing all the way to my racing heart. The vaporeon stood in a forward stance, crouching slightly and staring at her target, but her frown expressed only weariness. Behind me, the humans let out a tired sigh, and Doctor Belish ordered two medics to urgently reach his position.

The whines of another pokemon brought me back to reality. Next to me, Pride whimpered on the ground, his beautiful fur tainted by his own blood. The leaf blades had stuck themselves into his neck and side as if he had tried to dodge them and his trainer had his hands around them, pushing onto his pokemon and extracting more whimpers out of him.

"Anish, Agnes, you take care of that guy," Doctor Belish said in a pressing voice.

He stepped over me and knelt next to Pride. After inspecting the wounded pokemon for a moment, he sighed in relief.

"Ruby, come," Agnes whispered.

It took Topa gently nudging me to take my eyes off of my wounded friend, but they returned to him after scanning my squad in fear. After Sean helped Belish administer some first aid to stop the bleeding, he seized his rifle with a trembling hand. The knuckles of his fingers became white and his hand red from his overly strong hold of his weapon.

"Sir, requesting permission to pursue and eliminate," he growled.

"Permission denied," Belish replied. "You're going back with Pride. We'll take it from here. I don't think his life is in danger, but he definitely cannot continue fighting."

Sean trembled for a second, then grunted. "Understood, Sir."

"Ruby," Agnes whispered again. "Come, I need you."

My heart skipped a beat as I realised that I couldn't detect any trembling in her voice. The only one I had seen any sort of emotion from was Sean. Everyone else was poised and focused. Sean's emotional reaction could easily be forgiven because his pokemon had just been wounded, but what about mine? Even Topa had remained calm and tried to press me to follow. Was I the only one who had reacted to Pride's wound at all?

Ilma appearing by my side made me jolt.

"Emotions later," she said in a soothing voice. "Focus on the mission. We'll go see Pride once this is all over. You wanted the strength to protect everyone, didn't you? Then your job isn't over. Everyone else is still on the line here. Come."

It took me a few more moments of staring at Pride squirming on the ground to make a decision. Ilma was right - I had a responsibility. Despite being the weakest pokemon of our group, I was the only other zealot. I had been chosen by a pokemon goddess. I needed to make good on her choice.

"I'm coming," I whispered in a trembling voice.

"Good."

As the group walked towards the wounded medium, Belish stayed behind and began yelling into his radio. Dante crouched next to the wounded man, allowing Agnes to keep a hand on his wrist to keep track of his pulse, and Anish began inspecting the severed legs. Sean got up and asked permission to go with the group, and Belish handed him something before agreeing.

"My legs!" the man whimpered. "You didn't need to do that!"

"Considering you tried to kill us, I would say you're lucky," Sean replied. He held two ribbons in his hands, each equipped with a metallic buckle. "These are tourniquets. If I don't apply them to your legs, you will bleed out and die in a minute or two. I suggest you answer our questions."

The wounded man stared at Sean with wide eyes, and nodded weakly.

"Where are the others?"

"We're spread through. Patrolling and working."

"Where is your leader?"

"We don't" - the man wheezed and groaned, clenching on his stumps - "we don't have one anymore. He died years ago."

"You must-"

Agnes raised her hand to quiet Sean.

"Who controls the haunter?" she asked. "They are not your pokemon."

"No," the medium said. "There's a guy. Doesn't speak. The haunter stay with him."

"Where is he?"

"There's a hidden room in the lab." He vaguely gesticulated directions and started crying. "Please, don't let me die."

"All right. Lieutenant, please do the tourniquets, we'll cauterise." She looked at the medium. "You won't like this. Ruby, Topa, come here."

Topa and I carefully approached, measuring our steps so as not to step into the puddle of blood. Agnes pointed to the part where the legs had been cut off. The cut was so clean it looked like it had been made with a blade.

"Use your fire here," Agnes said. "Don't target too deep."

The ninetales and I exchanged worried looks, but didn't contest. As Sean busied himself applying the tourniquets to the man's legs, we used our fire to cauterise his wounds, trying to ignore the piercing screams that resonated deep in our ears. After we were done, Doctor Belish joined us with a group of medics.

"I'm going back," Sean said. "Good luck."

"Stay safe," Belish replied as Agnes opened her mouth. "Sergeant Trokair, we're going. Since we no longer have our Psychic type, Dante will provide cover and protection."

Everyone in the squad that was left nodded at once, the humans armed their weapons again, and we gave chase to the two fleeing mediums as the army medics took away both our wounded enemy and our wounded friend.

Chapter 60

Following the wounded man's vague directions proved to be somewhat of a challenge, but we progressed uncontested through the serpentine corridors that smelled of chlorine and bleach, the echoing hammering of our steps battling the distant shouts and screams reverberating to us.

The underground laboratory was eerily similar to the one we had found in the forest, but the light emanating from my wisp and Topa's two enveloped us in an anxious cover. With every step that we took, I pictured another line of phantump ambushing us with their leaves and mowing everyone down before Topa or I could react, or another group of haunter using Lick to paralyse us, then Shadow Claw to gut us, leaving us dying on the floor. The wisp that preceded us probably did more harm than good: being ahead, it undoubtedly announced our presence - not that there was any surprise left as the assault had been going on for what felt like hours already. My heart seemed to be the only one in a fit; the regular, albeit somewhat fast, heartbeats of everyone around me dictated the pace of our advance, but mine didn't seem to be able to align with anyone's and just sped ahead of the rest.

Topa and I were the front line of our formation. Ilma ran right behind, forming with us a triangle pointing backwards towards Dante, alone in our centre. Agnes, securely mounted on the giant absol, leaned forward, rifle at the ready, while Doctor Belish was last, holding his rifle against his chest with his right hand while his left remained about his mouth and held a radio that never seemed to quiet.

A closed double door appeared before us, marking the end of what had been a long chase in the dark. Hushed voices resonated from behind it, the reverberation from the narrow corridor making it impossible to understand them clearly.

Agnes and Belish positioned themselves to the sides of the door - Topa standing before Agnes and I before the colonel - while Ilma stood alone directly in front of it. On the colonel's count, Topa and I both threw a telekinetic push similar to the one I had first learnt into the doors.

The doors bursting open pulled short cries of panic from the room. Ilma pranced in, smiling confidently, and sat in the middle of the entrance.

"Surrender!" Belish ordered. He nodded towards Agnes, and both of them, together with Topa and I, showed ourselves to the sides still partially covered by the open doors. "You can't go anywhere. We know this lab has no other exits."

My eyes widened slightly as I scanned the room. Much larger than the other laboratory we had burst into, it had a perfectly square shape well lit by a series of strong ceiling lights that drowned the weak halos of our wisps. Series of tall cupboards bordered the walls to our sides, while a square of white desks formed a large ring in the centre of the room. On the wall opposite to the door, directly in front of us, were at least two dozen of the same giant tubes that we had found in the other laboratory. Not one of them was empty.

Two men draped in white coats stood by the central ring their hands hovering about a line of seven open laptops, two haunter floating about their heads. All four stared at us with shrunk pupils, stuck in the middle of their movements as if the blast of the doors had frozen them in time.

Across the door frame from me, a heartbeat also froze. Agnes's eyes had widened, but unlike mine, they were not drawn to the number of corpses floating in a transparent liquid on the other side of the room. She stared at the men and the haunter.

"You," she growled.

"You know them?" Belish asked.

"It's hard to forget the people who nearly killed you."

"You're the girl from the forest," one of the mediums said. Hatred filled my heart when I recognised the voice to be the one that had given the order to kill Agnes. "How are you still alive?"

Agnes hesitated, her brow furrowed with hatred like I had never seen in her. She took a couple raspy breaths, clenching her teeth to the point of making a sound that I could hear, and brought her left hand to her stomach.

"Surrender," she growled. "You're surrounded and outnumbered."

The two men stared at each other. Their eyes scanned the room, making a lengthy stop on the weapons raised in their directions, and rested on the two haunter. The two men and the two pokemon glanced at the wall on our left, where a cupboard was missing, then turned to us with resolve.

"We're not going down without a fight," one of them said.

"That can be arranged," Belish replied. "Ilma?"

The vaporeon stepped forward, growling.

"No," Agnes said. She nodded towards me and I too stepped forward, placing myself in front of a puzzled Ilma. "Let us fight this."

The colonel frowned. He remained silent for a few seconds, his gaze jumping between Agnes and me and our opponents, occasionally stopping on the vaporeon who sat behind me and looked at her trainer with inquisitive eyes.

"Very well," he said with a sigh. He addressed the mediums next. "This is your last chance to surrender. There's no need to fight."

"We are not surrendering. You haven't won. You don't know what's waiting for you."

"Your loss."

The two men scuffled to hide behind one of the central tables, and their two pokemon floated in front of them. The circle of desks formed an impromptu arena, Agnes on one side by the door and the two mediums on the other side.

"No real powers," my human said. "Whether you win or lose, you're done for. This is a fight for honour. If you try anything, we will open fire."

"Fine," the first medium said. "Unpowers only, no targetting the trainers."

An evil smirk spoiled Agnes's beautiful face. "Very well. Have at you."

My heart should have been racing. My legs should have been shaking. I should have been out of my mind with nerves, or fear, or anger, or a burning desire for revenge - but I felt nothing. Thoughts did not cross my mind as I stepped into the ring. My heart did not seem to beat as the two haunter and I walked in a slow circle, staring at one another. The room disappeared from existence, together with Belish, Ilma, the absol, the two mediums, until only Agnes and my opponents remained. Smells of bark and dirt came to me from inside my head, causing my nose to twitch, closely followed by an overwhelming scent of blood and sense of dread - which I chased away by leaning forward with a focused frown. Floating in front of me, the two haunter waited, their creepy eyes fixated on me. Like in our first encounter, the first move was mine to make. It had to be.

I threw an Ember towards one of them. As it flew up to dodge, the other one lunged at me, its clawed hands covered in Dark unpower.

"Ruby, roll and shoot up!"

Ducking allowed me to effortlessly dodge the first slash. I rolled to the side, narrowly escaping a second attack, and shot a new Ember

straight up as I did. A pained whimper accompanied the haunter as it withdrew.

"Roll again!"

I kept rolling. The other haunter slashed my previous position, but the hurried rolling made it difficult for me to keep control of my speed.

"Shadow Ball!" one of the men said.

"Ruby, contest with Will-O-Wisp!"

I quickly glanced at my trainer, frowning, while dissipating the real wisp I had kept up and summoning a new unpower one in front of me.

"Flame Charge!"

A wave of unfire instantly coated my body with an audible swoosh, causing me to jolt. The two Shadow Balls thrown by the haunter collided harmlessly with the wisp I had placed as an obstacle, which remained unaffected, floating before me as if to mock my opponents for their powerlessness. Crouching behind the flame, I propelled myself forward, appearing from the wisp like the haunter had appeared out of the trees before. One of them was directly ahead of me, and I charged into him like a missile, sending him tumbling into one of the desks his trainer hid behind.

"What the hell?" one of the two men cursed.

"Ruby, climb!"

The other haunter rushed at me with a growl after glancing at his unconscious friend. It swiped with both hands as if to seize me between his claws, but missed as I jumped. Landing on his fingers, I used them to propel myself up and make my way to the top of its head. Standing there, I unleashed a torrent of flames down as

powerful as I could make it, slamming the haunter against the floor until it stopped screaming, then puffed my chest and looked back at my trainer.

She withdrew a shuddering hand from her ear, a pained frown obscuring her fair traits.

"No way," the man who had ordered her killed said. "How?"

"Ruby," Agnes said between her teeth. "Use Flame Charge on these two."

I hesitated. A cold shiver shook my tails when I glanced at Agnes and noticed the hatred still spoiling her eyes, but neither Belish nor Ilma made any moves or comments indicating they might be against what she had ordered me to do. They stared at the two mediums, who looked at each other and at me trembling in fear, but their faces were unreadable.

A burst of flames covered my body again. Using the unconscious haunter's soft body as a trampoline, I vaulted up onto the desk and stared at my targets.

"What are you doing?" one of them whimpered. "We didn't agree to this!"

"You are under arrest," Agnes growled. "For the murders of numerous innocent pokemon, attempted murder on a vulpix, and attempted murder on a police cadet. Ruby."

My heart fluttered when I turned to the two men, rage building inside of me. For a moment, it was real fire that enveloped me, and I too began growling as I took a step forward.

The real fire I had used disappeared before I dashed into the first man's head, sending him tumbling over with a loud crack as I used his face as a platform to attack the second one. I landed next to the latter, then jumped back up and turned around with an audible sigh.

"Well done," Belish said. "You two have made some remarkable progress. And Ruby is a lot stronger than I thought."

He cuffed the two men while Ilma approached me with a proud smirk. Agnes moved forward with Topa and began conversing with her superior, but I wasn't listening.

"Well done," the vaporeon said. "You've grown quite powerful in a short time."

"I wanted to kill them," I whispered. Words came out of me one by one, slowly, as if struggling to escape my mind.

"That is natural. They tried to kill you first, after all. But you kept a hold of your emotions and did what you were tasked to do. I can only commend you for that. You had your revenge in the best possible way."

"I don't feel any better."

Ilma chuckled. "You will in time."

Our humans calling us interrupted our conversation, and I simply bowed slightly to the vaporeon before following her. The two unconscious men had been sat against one of the desks, their hands cuffed behind their backs. Belish barked orders into his radio and turned to Agnes with a deep sigh.

"Do you need a break?"

"I need a moment," she whispered.

"We can spare a bit of time, but we aren't done here. Let me know when you're up again, we need to find that hidden room." Belish knelt before Topa and stared at her. "You deserve some commendation as well, Topa. I didn't think you could control so many wisps at once and still have enough focus to fight."

Topa looked away with a sad frown. Standing by her side, I felt my cheeks become warm and my heart accelerate, but I turned my focus to Ilma in an attempt to ignore my jealousy.

"Sir, why did the mediums agree to this fight at all? Even if they had won, Ilma would have easily overpowered them. They had nothing to gain from it."

"My guess is that they were stalling," Belish replied. He approached the wall that the two mediums regularly glanced at and stood before it. "Maybe they thought that other mediums or more haunter would come. Maybe they hoped the gengar would come save them."

"Why did it not?"

Belish shrugged and stepped closer to the wall, running his hand on it. As Ilma joined her trainer, Topa and I approached Agnes, tails wagging. Dante knelt and I stood, putting my front legs on him for support, stretching myself so that my human could pet my head.

"You are fantastic, Ruby," she whispered. "Thank you so much. You too, Topa, you are doing incredibly well. We just have one more thing to do and then this whole ordeal is over."

While Topa nodded sternly, I brushed my head against what I could reach of my trainer - her foot - and barked with enthusiasm.

"Well fought indeed," Dante said. His voice resonated in my head again. "You have made immense progress since last I witnessed you battle."

"It's different," I whispered. "That was practice. It was fun."

"Your improvement is all the more impressive, then, isn't it? To my knowledge, this is your third exposure to the dangers of a fight. There aren't many police cadets who could defeat two haunter at once, let alone so handily, and they are far more experienced than you in all manners of combat."

"Thank you."

My eyes turned to Topa. She sat by the absol's tail, looking down, and did not seem to have noticed me looking at her. After a second of staring with the hope that my gaze would somehow notify her, I looked around, seeking the vapoleon instead, but as she seemed focused on trying to open the secret door to where we estimated the gengar would be, I grunted and looked at Dante again.

"Do you wish you could have fought?" I asked.

He looked at me with a frown. "Am I not fighting?"

"What? No. You're just a mount for Agnes. You're... a glorified horse."

"Glorified? Yes, one could say so. There may be glory in carrying Sergeant Trokair to the fight, especially given her contribution to this mission."

"How are you okay with it? I was told you're like 250 years old. You have to be insanely powerful, so why aren't you fighting with us? Agnes could have ridden so many other pokemon. Don't you feel offended that's all you're doing?"

"Yes, that is true. There are many other pokemon better suited for this than me, but they may not be privy to the secrets of this investigation. If this is what I am to do in this fight, then I will do it to the best of my ability, even if it means I become a mere glorified horse. There is more to battles than destructive power, and we absol are not destructive pokemon. In the sense that I am doing my duty in this mission, am I then not fighting alongside you?"

I couldn't help but look down as the absol smiled in my direction, a flush of shame brightening my cheeks. It was short-lived - Belish hollered for us to join him at the wall. He stood by an open cupboard next to the empty section of the wall.

"I think I found the opening mechanism," he said. "Are you ready?"

Although everyone nodded, Agnes slowly shook her head. "What do we do if the gengar isn't there? The murders will continue, won't they?"

"I doubt it. The haunter were being used for this project, and now that we've ended it, they'll stop - if they don't, we may have to organise a hunt and capture or kill all of them."

Agnes's shoulders dropped, dragging her chin down with them. She nodded softly, then with more conviction, and shouldered her rifle.

"I'm ready, then."

Belish nodded in return, then leaned into the cupboard. A clicking sound was heard as a square section of the wall separated from the rest and rotated slightly like a simple door. Topa's eyes became cerulean, as did the giant hatch, which flung open, and Ilma and I stepped forward.

Our paws stepped on a perfectly preserved parquet laid perpendicularly to the opening and forming a regularly alternating pattern. It covered the floor of the small room we had stepped into and transitioned into wooden walls presenting a series of wooden patterns of a light colour, overlaid atop a series of rectangles that extended into the empty high ceiling, lit only by a galaxy of weak lightbulbs.

A queen sized bed tucked into a corner of the room and covered by dark green sheets, accompanied with an ornate night stand to its left, and on it sat a tall man with haphazard dark hair and empty eyes, absently staring at a closed book that rested on the bed pillow close to him. He didn't jolt when the door was opened, and simply turned to us as we walked into the room.

"Release your disguise," Belish ordered in a commanding tone. "We know what you are. Don't make us send wisps your way."

As he mentioned that, I summoned my wisp and kept it hovering in front of us, vibrating as if threatening to fly into the gengar's space and uncover its secret.

The human shape that faced us disappeared as if blown away by some wind, and the gengar revealed itself to us, sitting in the centre of the bed and staring in our direction.

"Fine," the gengar said. His low, raspy voice, surprisingly pleasant to the ear, did not resonate against the walls like Belish's had. "I knew I'd be found eventually."

"Sir," Agnes whispered in a trembling voice.

She stared at the Ghost pokemon with wide eyes, pupils shrunk to the point of looking like a cat's in the inappropriately dim light of the tall room. Her shoulders and rifle had dropped, and her hand had let go of the trigger to join her second one in holding the front of the absol's saddle in a vain effort to reduce the shaking of her arms.

"What's wrong?" Belish asked.

"I can hear it."

"What?"

A finger insecurely lifted itself from one of her hands and pointed ahead. "I understand the gengar."

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Belish's eyes widened. His gaze jumped around, scanning Agnes as if in a quest for something, then returned to the gengar.

The ghost pokemon hopped from the bed and took a step forward, causing the colonel to jolt and ready his weapon.

"Don't move," Belish barked.

The gengar stared at him with empty eyes, then leaned forward and inspected Agnes. "Can you?" he whispered. "Yes... Yes, I suppose you can understand me. You feel like him, but... somewhat different."

"I am not like him!" Agnes roared.

"What did he say?"

"He said I was like the Founder."

"The Founder?" the gengar tilted his head to the side with a confused frown. "Is that what you call my friend?"

He remained silent, staring at my human as if expecting a reply. Facing her silence, he let out a tired sigh and stood straight again.

"Why are you here?" he said. "You captured the scientists, I heard the battle. You put an end to the project. Why come here and disturb me?"

"You are under arrest," Agnes growled. "For the murders of numerous innocent pokemon-"

"I heard that. You said it to the scientists. But I did none of these things. I didn't kill anyone, nor did I participate in the project."

"You lent your people to the mediums while knowing that they would be capturing and murdering innocent pokemon," Ilma said in a poised tone. "That makes you an accomplice in their crimes and therefore guilty of murder yourself."

The gengar slowly turned to the vaporeon with a slight frown. His gaze jumped between her, her trainer, then Agnes, bouncing in a cycle a few times, until it finally rested on me.

"I am sorry for you, human," he said, raising his eyes back to my trainer. "You can understand me but you cannot understand your own pokemon."

"I don't need to hear words to understand her," Agnes grunted. "You're just an anomaly."

"Am I?"

He let out a deep sigh, turned around, and climbed back on the bed, moving with purposeful torpidity. He took a few more steps that didn't disturb the smooth sheets and dropped himself by the book.

"I no longer have a purpose here. If you have questions, I will answer what I can, but I will not give you information on pokemon powers."

Agnes frowned, and repeated the gengar's words to Belish, endeavouring to repeat what the pokemon said out loud for the colonel from that point on - the only one in the room who was unable to understand it.

"What do you mean?" Belish asked.

The gengar shrugged. "I presume that, if you are here, then you have read the contents of my friend's journal, or you would not have known about my existence. Believe me if you will, but I considered him a genuine friend - the only friend I have ever had - and now that he is dead and can no longer communicate with me, I feel lonely. If

my only friend wouldn't live without himself, how could I live without him? I gave him mercy to make him happy, and now, there is nobody to do the same for me." A long sigh interrupted his speech, and his whole head tilted forward. "I am not just lonely - I am well and truly alone. I don't want to be alone."

He gently lifted the book and opened it with his hands, sifting through the pages with a sad frown.

"You humans are remarkable," he said. "We wild pokemon speak very little, and I had always regarded the chattiness of trained pokemon with disdain; but now it is evident to me why they become so talkative. If wild pokemon talked to one another the way humans do, would things be different for us?"

He closed the book and let out a deep sigh, then looked up at Agnes. His eyes withdrew to the book once more, then back to her, and with a jittery motion, he raised his possession towards my human, his hands presenting the book as an offering.

"Would you read this for me?" he asked. "It is my friend's full journal. I regret that he never taught me to read, so I must have someone do it for me now. That is all I ask."

"I am not reading you a book," Agnes growled. "Why did you visit the man? Why did you help him with his murders?"

The gengar held the book high, staring at Agnes in silence for a second. His sorrow turned to anger, then back to his creepy neutral stance, and he raised the journal to Belish instead with inquisitive eyes. The colonel slowly shook his head. With a disappointed sigh, the disgruntled pokemon deposited the book on the pillow with extreme care, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I was drawn to his power," the gengar said. "I intended to only watch him first, and our friendship developed from the first time I talked to him. I didn't expect he could."

"His power," Agnes repeated. "So he really could talk to the dead?" The gengar slowly nodded. "Why? How? Don't pretend you don't know."

"I don't know. All I know is that he was special, in much the same way that you are."

"What do you mean?"

The gengar shrugged again and refused to elaborate, blatantly ignoring Agnes's increasingly pressing prodding. After insisting for a few seconds, my trainer groaned and pushed herself on the saddle to reach an upright position.

"You knew that he wouldn't be able to save his soul, didn't you?" Belish asked. The gengar nodded slowly. "Then why help him?"

"I may be intelligent, but my inventiveness and creativity does not compare to that of humans, and I thought he may be able to. I hoped he would. I liked him."

"Why?" I asked.

Both humans in the room turned to me with confused frowns.

"You didn't know him," I said. "You'd talked to him for a few days only."

"Two weeks," the gengar replied, and repeated my question for Agnes. "He treated me with respect, not just fear, and he asked me if I wanted to be his friend. I accepted because I wanted to learn about humans and figure out why trained pokemon speak so much, and I didn't expect friendship to be so beautiful." He stared at his hands for a second, then snapped his gaze to Agnes. "You can speak to me," he said. "Will you be my friend?"

"Never in my life," my human growled. "You are responsible for the death of Topa's son. You are responsible for Ruby's wound. You are

responsible for the murder attempt on me."

The gengar blinked rapidly, staring at the three of us. "Oh," he whispered. "You're the ones. Then I owe you apologies."

"I care not for apologies," Topa growled. "I demand that you fight me."

"Goodness, no," the gengar stammered. "I wouldn't want to fight any of you, especially not the vaporeon. She and the vulpix have auras that feel similar, and I can tell that she would decimate me. I never felt anything like this, and I am scared. And you..." he stared at Topa for a second, then shook his head and looked away. "You feel the same, except worse. No, I won't fight you."

Topa stepped up, growling, and Agnes had to hush her for her to stop. She looked up at our human with imploring eyes, but didn't insist, and returned to her position by the saddle, her face distorted in a bloodthirsty frown.

"Are there any more operations like this anywhere?" Belish asked.

"No, there aren't. This is the only one. It wasn't even supposed to be this long. My friend told the mediums to quit before he died, but they didn't."

Belish waited for Agnes to translate, then nodded. "Is that why you didn't help them when we attacked the place?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't add up," my human said. The knuckles on her right hand turned white on the grip of her rifle. "If you were against what they were doing, why haven't you stopped the haunter? The journal said they were your people. You could have put an end to all this."

"I tried."

The gengar heaved a long sigh and looked down, the evil frown that normally covered his face disappearing under a form of sadness. His gaze raised itself to me, then Agnes, and he slowly shook his head.

"I tried," he repeated. "I told them there was no point in doing this anymore now that my friend was dead. They didn't listen. They kept going because they wanted to be with their humans, even if none of them could actually speak to them. Maybe I overestimated the value of communication in a friendship - you two seem extremely close to your pokemon, yet you can't talk to them either. Either way, my own people abandoned me. They found their friends as I was losing mine."

There was a short silence. Although Topa's expression had not changed, Belish no longer displayed his measured anger. He stared at the gengar with a gentle pitiful frown, his hands still firm on his weapon, and Ilma standing in front of him, shoulders and tail relaxed. Elevated on the perfectly neutral absol, Agnes's arm trembled from the strength of her grip, haunched over herself. A wince sometimes distorted her focus, accompanied with a jolt of her weapon hand towards her stomach, then with her arm trembling a little more before returning to its vengeful watch.

"Hold on," my human said.

Eyes turned to her. She relaxed her weapon hand and stood upright on the saddle of the quiet absol, wincing as she struggled to move. She used her left hand to hold herself up, and her right one let go of her rifle.

"Give me that journal."

Belish's pupils widened as if to combat the deep frown that obscured them. The gengar's eyes brightened as well, and he hurried from his position to deliver the book directly into Agnes's expectantly open hand.

"I'm not going to read it to you," she barked. She flipped through the pages, stopping at random points and reading for a brief moment, then gave the journal back to the gengar who emitted a quiet whine. "This really is the Founder's full journal, isn't it?"

"Of course. I took it after my friend died."

"Then why not take the other one too? The smaller one that contained information about you from the night stand."

"That journal was a test for the other mediums. My friend prepared a book for them so that they would know what questions to ask after he died. He told them about it, but not where it was or what it contained - they couldn't risk that information exiting the medium circle. That's why it details everything about Project Medium. They were to contact him after his death and verify his identity by asking questions about it. And, if they were truly able to talk to the dead, I was to appear to them. Since it turns out all of them were frauds, I took the form of a man and watched them destroy my friend's purpose and memory." The gengar waved his book again. "This journal you refuse to read for me has the details of the plan my friend and I had. A plan that nobody but us two could know about."

"That makes sense," Belish said after Agnes translated. "The mediums were supposed to acquire the mansion at that auction. They hadn't planned for your father to make the purchase. That's why they resorted to trying to break in... and everything that led to."

The gengar frowned, then turned to Agnes, canting his entire body to the side. "Your father owns the mansion? And you never found the journal all this time?"

"Shut up."

She seized her rifle and the gengar retreated back to the bed.

"Is it true that haunter can play with a person's senses?" Belish asked.

"Of course. All but hearing. This is a power unique to us, no other Ghost pokemon can do it."

A blue wisp appeared by Topa's head and floated towards the gengar. It illuminated his dark fur with a gentle light, but revealed no illusions.

"I am defeated," the gengar said, raising an eyebrow in our direction. "I stand to gain nothing by lying to you. All I want is for this entire thing to be over."

"And then what?" Belish asked. "We are not letting you go. You're complicit in the murders of dozens of pokemon. By the laws of our country, you should be arrested."

"The laws of your country are not the law of the wild," the gengar said with defiance. "I only obey the laws that I, as a pokemon, must obey. How do you intend to hold me? Any chains you may put on me I will slip out of. You can't arrest me, even if you say I am under arrest. If you have no more questions, then you have no choice but to let me go. I just want to live in peace and mourn my friend."

Agnes and Belish glanced at each other. My trainer's gaze sneaked towards Topa, who sat still by the absol with fury in her eyes, then met her superior's eyes again; and he replied to her with a surreptitious nod.

"Do we?" she growled. "Topa. He's all yours."

The gengar's eyes widened. They began shaking in fear, pleading back and forth between Agnes and Belish, as the ninetales took several steps forward, growling.

The wisp she had summoned multiplied as the gengar leapt out of the bed towards the wall that faced us. It duplicated thousands of times, turning into a blanket of fiery light that spread across the entire room, covering the walls, the furniture, the ceiling, the floor, then formed a series of vertical bars between us and her too tightly

spread for even me to slip through the openings. The thick layer of raw power that Topa had just created was blinding even to me, and both my humans, Ilma, and Dante threw their gazes away, wincing and closing their eyes in response to the onslaught of light. By the time the gengar reached the wall, he had to fling himself back to the centre of the room, floating above and away from the flames that had cut off his retreat.

"What the hell?" Belish cursed.

The colonel shielded his eyes from most of the light with his arm, and Agnes squinted with a wince, hands seizing the saddle on which she sat. Although Dante clenched his eyes close, head away, Ilma stared at the wall of fire before us, her pupils shrunk so small that I could see the white of her eyes. Her tail shuddered visibly behind her, and her shoulders and back dropped. She observed the spectacle before her, and my heart sank when I came to the realisation that, for the first time since I had met her, she was scared.

As was I.

"Fight me!" Topa roared.

The sound of her voice snapped my attention back to her. Bent forward and tails spread in a terrifying fan behind her, she stood by the bars she had set to keep us safe. The gengar, floating in the middle of the fiery arena, shook visibly in terror.

It rolled in the air to dodge a fireball so hot that I felt the air burn behind my fiery bars. The attack crashed upon the ceiling in a ripple of flames that transiently competed with the carpet of power that covered it, and the gengar continued rolling to dodge a barrage of fireballs.

"Well, this is terrifying," Ilma whispered.

She looked at the battle with eyes as open as the strong light allowed them to be, still shaking slightly, but with an expression of

focus. Next to us, the humans did their best to watch, squinting and regularly moving their eyes away when they weren't being obscured by their excessive blinking. Of all of us, Dante alone kept his head away.

Floating back to an upright position, the gengar fired a series of black beams surrounded by a dark purple aura towards Topa, emanating a form of Dark power I had not faced yet.

The ninetales didn't move a hair. Her eyes turned blue, and the rings dissipated into thin air long before they were even close to her, causing the gengar to gasp and lose his evil smirk. He frowned and groaned.

A gasp shook me as he disappeared. Topa's body became covered in a wheel of Unfire power, and the gengar reappeared next to her only for his punch to collide with the ninetales's protection. He screamed as the ring of fire slammed into him, dragging him towards a wall, and screamed again in pain as he used his arms to push himself out from underneath the inferno.

He had no time to even gasp before a torrent of real fire enveloped him. There was no noise as he burnt, and after only a few seconds, the fire dissipated, leaving a charred body to fall to the ground. The infinite wisps disappeared immediately after, and Topa's shoulders dropped a long sigh out of her. She sat where she was, laying her ears and looking down.

It was Belish who broke the long silence that followed.

"Okay. First of all... what the hell?" His stunned gaze crept towards Agnes, who looked back with wide eyes, and gestured widely towards what had just been a battlefield. "You didn't say anything about... about this."

"I had no idea, Sir."

"Topa," Belish said. The ninetales turned her head back to him. "You could have let us know you were this unfathomably powerful. Pride may not have been wounded had you fought properly from the start."

Her gaze avoided the colonel's, and she looked down, ears and tails laid.

"Sir, it's not fair to blame her for Pride's injuries," Agnes said. "I don't think even she knew she could do this. She's never had much confidence in her fighting prowess."

"Well, she should. This was..." Belish let out a deep sigh and pressed the ridge of his nose between two fingers. "We can sort this out another day, but I will want her to go through proper evaluation of her strength. Well done, you two. Ruby as well."

"Thank you, Sir."

Belish walked up, carefully avoiding the charred corpse, and picked up the book on the bed.

"We have a little more work to do, but this should be the end of this. However... it just raised more questions. Needless to say, it is crucial that you keep your - I can't believe I'm saying this - your ability to speak to gengar to yourself. The commissioner only will be informed of what happened here."

"Obviously."

"Ilma, Dante, have you ever felt anything about Agnes?"

Both pokemon shook their heads.

"Why? Felt what?" Agnes asked.

"The gengar said you felt similar to the Founder, didn't he? I assume it has something to do with pokemon powers, or there would have been other signs. Maybe with Ghost pokemon alone, or only haunter and gengar."

"I don't think what the gengar said holds any truth."

Belish raised an eyebrow. "Believe him or not, the fact is you could understand him and had a full conversation. We will need to get to the bottom of that."

"Understood," Agnes replied with a sigh. She looked at the dead gengar, and sighed again. "Sir, can we..."

"Can you what?"

"He insisted that the dead pokemon be returned to their owners and properly buried after the project was finished. I don't think it's fair to just... leave him there."

The colonel peeked at the body and shrugged. "He died in the exact same room as his friend. I don't think we can do better for him."

A short bark turned our attentions to Topa. Her eyes glowed blue, as did the body of her opponent, and she carefully lifted it to deposit it atop the sheets of the bed.

"That will do," Belish said. "Let's go back. It's time for us to close this chapter for good."

Agnes nodded slowly, and ushered Topa and I to follow as Dante turned around and walked out of the room. None of us bothered looking back as we stepped into the laboratory with the two still unconscious mediums, but Doctor Belish closed the door behind him, enclosing the gengar into a tomb of his own making where I chose to believe he was finally at peace.

Chapter 62

"Come on, Agnes," Belish said. "A little more."

It was Saturday, September 22nd, shortly before noon. After our victory against the mediums and the successful end to Project Medium, we were awarded two weeks of absolute rest - which, naturally, Agnes did not capitalise on. Although she mostly stayed in bed with Rakuen taking care of her, she insisted to continue physical therapy and requested to increase the frequency of sessions. While she was not being tortured by her therapist, she idled on her computer with me laying on her or by her side and followed the material that Derek sent to her from the police academy, and when she wasn't catching up on classes, she spent her time comforting Topa. I welcomed the rest after the hectic two months, and my worry for the ninetales grew every day she refused to eat. It took about a week for her to begin recovering.

At the end of our short vacation, we were taken to the commissioner's office, curtains drawn and door shut, and Agnes sat at the main desk, staring at the journal we had found in the Trokair manor, with an empty bottle of water next to her. Belish sat at the edge of the desk, a laptop open before him, staring at the screen and peeking at Agnes regularly. Ilma and Topa laid together in a corner, and although the ninetales had her eyes closed, the vaporeon watched my human with interest.

"This isn't doing anything," she sighed. Her focus had been on the journal for what felt like hours, and she held her head in her hands with a pained frown. "I am not a medium."

"It won't be long until the commissioner returns. Give it one more try for me, please? You've read the journal, you know what to do."

"What the journal says won't apply to me, Sir, I insist. I can try all I can to summon the Founder's ghost or memories, it won't work. If I

could talk to the dead, I surely would know by now."

"Maybe not. You never faced a person's death like he did, but you did nearly die yourself - twice, even. It would make sense for you to have the same power, since you could talk to the gengar, wouldn't it?"

Agnes's gaze drifted away at the mention of her near-death experiences. She pulled one of her hands from supporting her head, staring at it, and dropped her shoulders with a sigh.

"All right," she whispered. "I'll try one more time."

She crossed her arms on the desk, right below the journal, and leaned forward with a focused frown. I perked my ears and watched her, focusing my attention on trying to detect any form of power coming from her, the journal, or the room - only to jolt when she sighed.

"It's not working," she said. There was a hint of frustration and relief in her voice. "Please don't ask me to try again."

"All right." Belish closed his laptop, and Agnes the journal. "How are you feeling? Ready for the ceremony?"

"Of course not," Agnes sighed. "Is it really necessary? I don't want to be seen in a wheelchair."

"I can understand, but you will be whether or not you attend the ceremony - unless you plan on not showing up to class on Monday. Might as well show yourself here first where you have a lower chance of being bugged."

"I can think of at least two people who will bug me when I return to class anyway. I just don't like being... publicised for what happened to me."

"It's part of your achievements. Of course it needs to be acknowledged."

Agnes's eyes lowered themselves to me, and I barked with enthusiasm.

"Do you promise I won't be bothered by reporters?"

"You have my word," Belish said. "The commissioner made it clear that he would not tolerate any attempts at questioning. We'll have a line of policemen to guard you either way."

"Thank you."

Agnes reached for the bottle of water and took a sip out of it. She grimaced, pulling it away from her, and put it back down. A knock came from the door as she closed it.

"Water too warm?" Belish asked. "Let me get you a replacement, I'll be right back."

He allowed the commissioner in as he left, greeting him with a short salute and closing the door behind him. Ilma didn't move from her position, but nudged Topa with her tail, and the ninetales looked up with weary eyes.

"Good morning, Agnes," the commissioner said. "I see Colonel Belish already put you to work."

"Good morning, Sir. Nothing worked, and I have to admit, I am relieved."

"I suppose I can understand. Nobody wants to be able to talk to the dead, do they?"

Agnes nodded slowly as the commissioner sat next to her.

"Ceremony started. The mayor will be giving a speech, I just need to drive you to the town hall to take you up when she mentions your

name."

"I'm glad I'm not there to hear it."

The commissioner chuckled. "Rightfully so. You'd be cringing, but hey - people do love a tale of heroism, don't they?"

"With all due respect, Sir, there is nothing heroic about any of this."

"We may have conflicting views on what constitutes a hero, then, but you cannot deny that you've achieved something great. You solved a case older than a decade that stumped all the best detectives and policemen in the country." He waved his finger as Agnes opened her mouth. "Anyway, before you go, there is something you must know. I was in contact with the president shortly after sending you on vacation. The... unexpected development between you and the gengar is now a matter of national security."

Agnes remained silent a second, her gaze turning sour. She lowered her head.

"Great," she whispered. "Just what I needed."

"It's not as bad as you think. It does mean that the government is aware of it and that you must keep it secret from everyone, but it also means the president himself will see to it that you are not bothered to investigate it - at least not yet. I have no idea what he plans to do with the information."

"Whatever he is planning, it will come back to bite me anyway. There is no way he will not want this looked into, and that means trouble for me. I wish we could all forget about this and pretend it never happened."

"So do I," the commissioner said with a tired sigh. "Alas, we have to face the truth here. This is a historical first and one of the biggest opportunities we've ever had to study pokemon. You may be the beginning of a scientific breakthrough."

"I hope not."

Another knock came from the door, and Belish returned with a bottle of cold water which he handed to Agnes.

"It's time to get going, I believe. Mayor is about to start her speech."

"Let's go, then," the commissioner said.

The task of controlling and pushing Agnes's wheelchair was given to me, while Topa was tasked with loading her in and out of the commissioner's car, both using telekinesis - and with Belish nearby ready to intervene.

The town hall was a large old-looking building with a long colonnade that made up its front, topped by a triangular roof. The plaza in front of the entrance had been set up with half a dozen rows of chairs facing the elevated podium that led to the building. The mayor, a young lean woman with long bright red hair, stood in the middle of it, delivering the end of her speech. She peeked at the car as it parked next to the plaza, and nodded subtly in our direction.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Sergeant Agnes Trokair."

Thunderous applause erupted as Agnes was taken out of the vehicle and placed onto her wheelchair, wearing her military uniform together with the police hat that I had not seen before. As I pushed her up a ramp towards the mayor, I took a peek at the chairs, and was disappointed to see her family in the first row, both her parents wearing formal suits while Melissa wore a more casual pink dress. In the rest of the front row were the other members of the operation, including Pico and Derek, who both nodded at us, Sergeant Anish and his sandlash, and Sean and Pride, the smiling espeon wearing a navy coat that hid a slew of bandages covering his body and neck. In the back row, I caught a glimpse of Flick sitting in front of Faith, her tail mercilessly hammering the leg of the chair her trainer sat on. I couldn't find the silent eevee or her trainer in the large number of people gathered for the ceremony.

The applause died when Agnes reached the mayor, who shook her hand with a deep bow. Topa and I sat on each side of the wheelchair, looking up and puffing our chests, and the mayor acknowledged us by tapping our heads.

An aide in a suit and a purple tie brought a golden box to the mayor and opened it for her. The woman pulled a round medal out of it, split in half between a red and a white gemstones, except for a silver ridge across the middle that led to a disc of solid gold. The ribbon was striped red, black, and white, the two outer stripes wider than the central one. As Agnes lowered her head, the mayor gently put the medal on her.

"On behalf of the city and the population, I thank you for your service and your sacrifice," she said.

Agnes raised her head with a forced smile, and the mayor seized another, smaller medal from the box. To my surprise, she knelt in front of me.

"We thank you too, Ruby, for your service and your achievements."

I lowered my head and she passed the medal around my neck. She repeated the process with Topa, with the exact same sentence she used for me, as I stared at Ilma with a confused frown. The vaporeon smiled widely and bowed.

There was no applause. The mayor sent the aide away, but another came, with another box. The commissioner walked up to the stage, shook the mayor's hand, and turned around. He leaned forward and undid the epaulettes of Agnes's uniform, then replaced the old ones bearing two golden triangles with new ones decorated with three horizontal gold stripes.

It was Agnes's turn to stare at her superior with confusion as the commissioner brought his flat hand towards his head in a stern military salute.

"Major Trokair," he said in a formal tone.

Agnes returned the salute with a slow motion, still frowning in confusion.

"In recognition of your extraordinary deeds and personal sacrifice in closing the longest investigation of the last century, I grant you this exceptional promotion. May you serve your country and your fellow citizens well in the future."

"Upon this ensign I swear it," Agnes replied.

The commissioner smiled widely and brought his arm down. He then knelt next to me and enclosed a tight collar upon my neck, decorated with a police badge bearing the same three horizontal stripes. He then repeated the salute.

"Pokemon Major Ruby," he said.

I puffed my chest and barked in response.

The commissioner then walked towards Topa and pulled another police badge out of the box.

"Topa, though you may be a civilian, the police force welcomes you to their ranks if you are willing to serve. You have more than proven your worth, and whether or not you join us, you will always be part of our family."

He held the ribbon over the ninetales's head, who looked at him in silence for a second; and she lowered her head, allowing the commissioner to pass the badge around her neck then salute.

"Pokemon Sergeant Topa."

She did not reply with a bark, but a deep bow, and finally, the audience erupted in applause.

We were taken back to the police station after the decoration ceremony and the lunch with the mayor that followed. Sitting together with Ilma and me in a corner next to the window of the commissioner's office, Topa had taken off both her medal and badge with her telekinesis and stared at them with awe. I got a few taps from Ilma's tail as congratulations, and she laid in silence, watching pensively.

Agnes had claimed the commissioner's chair again and stared at her medal together with a brand new police badge laid on the desk before her. Her two superiors sat on the other side of the desk, slightly off to the side.

"I was not told about the promotion," she said.

"Promoted officers rarely are," the commissioner replied. "You deserve it, don't you dare deny that; but it does come with a few more obligations, and you can't quite be eased into them given you jumped three ranks from sergeant."

"I understand. Being a major puts me one rank below lieutenant, right? That means I have de facto lead over my entire promotion."

"Correct. We'll replace your physical training classes with officer classes starting from your return to school, but it should all be fairly easy. You can choose to become a commissioned officer for armed forces, including police, or continue on your path to being a detective. If I may give you advice, I recommend you pursue a higher rank as an officer - your situation will likely land you in secret services."

Agnes looked down with a pensive frown. "I agree with switching to becoming a commissioned officer, then."

"Wonderful. I'll make that happen. Congratulations again, Major Trokair - and you as well, Ruby and Topa. Believe me when I say you three are the most valuable students this school has had in decades."

He tapped Agnes's shoulder a few times with a large smile.

"Can I see my parents?" she asked. "My dad seemed to want to talk to me at the ceremony, so I assume they came here."

"Sure. I'll get them in. Don't mention anything about the mission, all right?"

"Of course not. Thank you."

The commissioner and Belish both nodded towards Agnes, and left the room with Ilma, leaving our human alone with Topa and I. We didn't enjoy much respite, though, as her parents entered shortly after, followed by Melissa who closed the door behind them.

To my surprise, Ma'am stayed at the entrance of the room, and Agnes allowed her father to hug her. I jumped on the desk as he approached, but my human gestured for me to stay put, and I sat where I was, slightly behind her, and glaring down at her parents.

"Congratulations," he said. "We are both extremely proud of you."

"Thank you."

There was no joy in Agnes's tone when she replied. She gave her mother a chilling glance and pushed her father away.

"Will you still be hosting a funeral?" she asked.

"Yes," her mother replied. She took a single step forward and looked down. "Agnes, would you listen to what I have to say?"

"Make it quick."

Ma'am took a deep breath and interlaced her fingers, playing with her thumbs. It took her a second to look up with a sad frown.

"Agnes, I am sorry."

There was a silence. Both my human and I stared at Ma'am with wide eyes, and Agnes blinked rapidly.

"Come again?" she said.

"I am sorry," her mother repeated. "I... You were right. I made all these rules to prevent you from being too attached to your pokemon. I really meant it when I said I was trying to protect you, but what I didn't realise was that you were already lonely because we failed you as parents, and I made the assumption that you would react the same way I did if your pokemon were to disappear. And now I see you wouldn't have. If Ruby were to disappear you would spend months looking for her. You wouldn't give up after a night like I did. So, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the way I treated you when you were a child. I'm sorry I didn't visit you after your accident, I won't even try to make excuses for that. And I'm sorry for hurting you without ever noticing."

She took a deep breath and walked up to me, then knelt.

"I owe you apologies too, Ruby. You didn't deserve to be lashed out at like I did. I'm sorry."

"You're not just saying that to make yourself feel better, are you?"

Ma'am glanced at my human with a sorry gaze. "I sort of am. I do want to make things right, but above all, I want you to know that you are loved and that we are both extremely proud of you. I want to undo the damage I did before I leave."

"Before you leave?" Agnes frowned in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Our firm is expanding to the far east. I will move there to oversee the process, and we'll need someone around to give orders anyway. Melissa will stay here with your father."

Agnes looked down for a few seconds. "All right. I accept your apologies then. Stay safe on your journey there."

"Thank you."

She opened her arms and her mother walked around the desk to give her a shy hug.

"What about the house?"

"Police and I came to an agreement," Sir said. "Since the manor was illegally purchased, it and the land that surrounds it are going back to the city. I agreed to have it torn down at my charge, and the forest will be replanted there and kept off-limits. We still own the lake and the path to it though."

"Are you sure? That mansion meant a lot to you, didn't it?"

"Well... considering I lost my cherished pokemon and nearly lost my daughter indirectly because of it, I'd rather have it be torn. We'll rebuild a new one somewhere else, far away from all this ordeal."

"What of the maids?"

"We're still paying them until they find new work. We'll re-hire the ones that are willing to stay once the new manor is built. Rakuen explicitly requested to remain in your service, if you want her."

"I would love to keep her. She's indispensable."

"So be it then."

Sir grinned widely and, after more hugs were exchanged - including a longer one from Melissa - Agnes watched her family leave with a large smile.

"Ruby."

Articuno's voice jolted me awake.

"We need to talk to you," she continued, resonating deeply in my head. "Are you alone?"

I closed my eyes and directed my thoughts to her. "No," I replied. "I'm with Agnes and Topa. They're sleeping."

"Good. Step away and close your eyes."

I stood slowly, making sure not to wake anyone up, and jumped down from the bed with a confused frown. Articuno didn't reply to my prodding about what she wanted, and after a few frustratingly ineffective attempts, I closed my eyes as instructed.

A second after, I was freezing.

A loud gasp caused me to open my eyes. I was back in the White Hat, inside the cave that Articuno had made her home in, standing by the ice pedestal she laid on. Floating peacefully about her head, and about as tall, was a tiny pink mouse with short ears and a long puffed tail.

My breath failed me.

"Hello," Mew said. She had a high-pitched, very feminine voice, that resonated in crystal tones against the walls of the cavern. "I'm Mew. Don't introduce yourself, I know who you are."

"You're... but... why..."

I mumbled incoherently for a few seconds, under the amused stares of Articuno and Mew. I had to take a deep breath to gather my thoughts before I could articulate a question.

"This is why I don't normally show myself to anyone," Mew said with a tired sigh. "Are you okay?"

"I'm... I'm sorry, I'm okay, I just didn't expect this. More importantly, how did I get here?"

"I teleported you. I don't normally do that, but we have important matters to discuss."

My heart skipped a beat. Of course, I knew what she wanted to talk about. There was no need for me to ask, or for her to confirm. Yet, my thoughts began racing along with my heartbeat when I imagined where the conversation may be going - where I didn't want it to go.

"Okay," I whispered. I sat where I was and breathed heavily. "I'm listening."

"Oh, you recovered quickly! I like it." Mew turned to Articuno with a large smile. "You were right."

The giant bird simply opened her beak in a large smile.

"So," Mew said. "You're a human who was transported to our world and took the body of a vulpix in the process." I nodded - not to confirm, but to indicate that I followed. "This is a problem on a level that you probably can't understand. We need you to-"

"Wait," I interrupted.

Mew frowned and floated closer to me. While even Articuno had her own personal scent, it didn't seem that Mew had one. She only smelled of rocks and ice and the giant bird she had been close to.

"How is it a problem? If you think it is, do you know what happened to me? How I became a vulpix?"

Articuno opened her beak widely again. "I told you we should tell her what we know. You can't just summon her here, say these things, and not expect her to have questions."

"Okay," Mew said.

She sat in the air, staring me down with a bizarrely neutral gaze that I couldn't decipher.

"We don't know for sure what happened to you," she said. "What we can tell you is that worlds are at a certain distance from one another - think of them as bubbles on water. They don't touch, of course, that would be catastrophic, but they can get pretty close. Time flows at different rates between them, which depends on their distance from one another, but when they get close, their calendars align and sometimes match. In most worlds, there is a different version of you - it just so happens that the you of this world was a vulpix. Your... let's call it your consciousness, somehow transferred from your original world to this one. We don't know how, but now the two worlds are tangled because of you."

There was a long silence as I tried to process the information.

"Okay," I said. "So I'm... My consciousness... is currently in two worlds at once, right?"

"Correct."

"And that means that those two worlds are tied and can't... move? As normal."

"Indeed!"

"So you're going to ask me to choose which world to stay in."

Mew's face widened. She then nodded with energy, floating in circles around me.

"Yes! Indeed! You are very intelligent. But that's not all. You see, we can't duplicate or split your consciousness, and there is only one way to sever your connection to one of your two worlds."

"Let me guess." My face became sombre, and I looked down, ears laid. "One of me has to die."

As if mourning for the decision I was to make, Articuno and Mew responded with solemn nods.

"I promise it will be painless," Mew said. "And I understand that this is a horrible choice, but we've tried other ways, and we can't think of any other solutions."

"Okay. Well, I've made my decision then."

Mew frowned. "Have you? I must admit I expected a lot more anguish. Some tears, maybe - I even expected you to lash out at me. I didn't think you'd answer immediately, I was prepared to give you a day or two to consider the situation."

"No," I said with an indifferent shrug. "I think I had my decision made months ago, really. It just never mattered. Can I just make a request?"

"Sure."

"After I die, will you look after my sister?"

"I can't promise I can, but I will try. Do you have anything you want her to know? I can arrange to leave a message."

My head lowered itself. The blue eyes and beautiful freckles that adorned my sister's face came back to me, accompanied soon by the tears of that fateful birthday. How much would she cry after my death? How much had she already cried from my disappearance? How badly were my parents treating her? She still needed protection, and that wasn't something I could task someone else with. It had to be me.

I shook my head. There were other people who needed my protection and my company, and they would be equally devastated if I were to abruptly pass away. No matter what decision I made, I would be hurting people. People I loved.

A quiet whine made me realise that I had begun crying. I sniffed once, looked up at Mew, and sniffed again. Maybe, in the end, I had not made my decision yet.

"Tell her I always did love her," I whimpered. "And that she made me happy."

"Very well," Mew said. "It's decided, then?"

"I have one more question. My human, Agnes, she-"

"We know," Articuno said. "Yes, it was the same thing as you. The cat was her in your world."

"Does that mean she will have to make the same decision I do?"

Mew and Articuno looked at each other with sorry eyes.

"Simply put... no," Mew said. "There is no version of her in that world anymore. So, do you confirm your decision?"

It took me a second to nod insecurely.

"All right. I will be keeping an eye on you to make sure what we do won't have any adverse effects. I guess I should say welcome to our world."

"I... thank you. Should I keep all this a secret?"

"Yes," Mew said. Her face became transiently serious. "Especially my existence, and from everyone, including the friends of yours who know about Articuno and the others."

Her stare made me gulp insecurely. "I- I understand. Can I go back?"

"Sure. Close your eyes."

I obeyed, taking a deep breath to prepare myself for teleportation, and swiftly fell asleep.

It was Topa who woke me up the morning after by licking my ear. I had been sleeping on the floor, in the exact spot where I was before being teleported.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "Why did you sleep on the floor?"

"Oh. I don't remember." A yawn interrupted me. "Thank you for waking me up."

I watched her leave with a foggy brain. I wasn't sure if my meeting with Mew was a dream, or had really happened, or if anything had actually changed. I didn't feel any different, aside from being particularly tired. All I remembered was seeing my little sister cry - because of me.

Agnes called me from outside the room and I joined Topa who waited by the door. We followed our human's voice to the living room, where she sat on the sofa with the black and white pillows, her walker waiting to her right between the sofa and the table. On the latter, over a silky white cover to protect the wood, a plastic tray laid before her with a jug of chocolate milk, an abundance of cookies, a chansey egg, and a pink berry. On the sides of the small table were also small dishes containing a mix of dry and wet food, one yellow and one orange. My tails began wagging furiously upon the sight of the fruit.

"Ah, Ruby," Agnes said. "Come here!"

She opened her arms and I threw myself into them. After a short hug and a few pets, we all took our places around the table - Agnes having to slide down from the sofa with a grunt to sit on the floor - and enjoyed a warm breakfast. Both humans tried the berry again after I barked for them to, which sent Rakuen stumbling for the bathroom, and both Topa and I got a piece of the chansey egg that Agnes forced herself to eat.

"Topa, do you want to come to classes with us on Monday?" Agnes asked. "You're part of the police now, I think it would be best to get

you some training."

The ninetales lowered her head and remained silent for a second. She looked up at Agnes, her eyes moving left and right, and finally nodded once.

Our human grinned widely. "All right! I'll let the commissioner know. That's probably going to bring more attention to me, but at this point, I don't think I can dodge it anymore."

She helped herself stand with the sofa and seized her walker.

"I'm going back to the room," she said. "I have a few calls to make, but I'll call you when I'm done, okay?"

Topa and I nodded at the same time, as Rakuen returned, a grimace of disgust upon her face. She complained about me tricking her into eating a berry, giggling as she pretended to lecture me, and demanded that I help her with cleaning the table as an apology - which I happily did. Topa went to the pokemon room and waited for me to join her.

"Would you like me to train you?" I asked. "Get you a head start on police training."

"I doubt that two days of training will give much of an advantage," she said. "I do agree, though. I think it may be fun."

I bent over, fanning my tails behind me.

"Let's play fighting," I said.

Topa blinked rapidly. "Come again?"

"Let's play fighting," I repeated. "It's about time, no?"

"I... I remember last time I asked you to, you said you could not do it. What changed?"

"Well... I used to be embarrassed at the idea of being an animal, but I am not anymore. I've made my de... my peace with it. I became a vulpix, and I am a vulpix. That doesn't mean I can't remember that I used to be human."

Topa stared at me for a second, blinking, and a wide smile brightened her beautiful face.

"Very well," she said. "Will I still get to be your mother?"

"You are the best mother that I ever had."

She smiled even more, playfully bent over herself, and after a few seconds of circling each other, I jumped at her and tackled her into the ground. We began wrestling intensely for what felt like hours, until Agnes called us from the bedroom, and as we rushed to join her in bed, I felt the happiest I remembered being in my life - whether my old or my new one.

Epilogue

Six months after the decoration ceremony, Ruby, Topa, and Agnes returned to the lake that Agnes's family owned. It was a cold night of early spring, and the two pokemon slept huddled together in a single tent by the water, under the warm protection of their fluffy coats. A small eevee with yellow fur slept on top of the ninetales, nursed by the slow movements of the latter's chest.

Agnes stood outside, held upright by the two crutches on which she leaned. The icy water of the pristine lake bit her naked feed with the support of a gentle breeze, and although she wore only a shirt and jeans, she did not shiver or cover herself with her arms. A look of sorrow on her face, she looked up at the snow-covered mountain far in the distance through a break in the heavy mist that covered the lakeside.

A rustle to her left caught her attention. She peeked at it and sighed, then turned around and took a few laborious steps towards a bush by the edge of the forest.

"I knew you would be there," she said. "The mist gives you away."

A canine pokemon stepped out of the combined covers of the bush and the mist. Much taller than a human, most of its body was covered in teal fur, except for the bottom of its muzzle, belly, and inner part of its upper limbs, all covered in a fur whiter than the snow Agnes was just gazing at. A few more spots of white adorned its shoulders and legs, bringing attention to the two ribbon-like limbs that protruded from the end of its spine. Emerging from the middle part of its muzzle was a large hollow jewel in the form of a tall hexagon and coloured like frozen jade, half as tall as Agnes herself, with two spikes extending over the top of the pokemon's red eyes and forming elongated rigid eyebrows. As it stared down at the human before it, its long purple mane flowed behind it, agitated by a wind that did not affect the leaves surrounding it.

"Hello, Suicune," Agnes said, bowing as she could on her crutches.

"Hello," Suicune replied. Her voice resonated like a chime in a snowy winter. "I came here to check on you."

"Thank you. I'm... doing better. I can somewhat walk now."

Agnes lifted one of her crutches with a shy smile, to which Suicune granted a passing glance before turning her gaze back to the human.

"I..." Agnes hesitated. "I never thanked you for saving my life."

"I did no such thing. I simply-"

The pokemon was interrupted by Agnes stumbling towards her and wrapping her arms around the base of her neck. She embraced Suicune, laying her head on her flank and tightening her hold.

"What are you doing?" Suicune asked.

"It's called a hug. I don't know how else to thank you, I thought you would... I'm sorry, I shouldn't have touched you without asking."

As Agnes pushed herself away, one of Suicune's tails held her in place.

"You may continue," the pokemon said. "This is... pleasant."

She bent her legs, laying down in a relaxed position and bringing Agnes with her. The human let out a quiet sigh and turned around to lay more comfortably against the giant canine's flank.

"I'm doing better," Agnes repeated. "I have a new path for my career. I've resolved the problems I had with my family, we put an end to the murders, and Ruby and Topa are finally happy."

"Are you?"

Agnes lowered her head and hesitated. "Yes," she finally said. "I think I am. Having Ruby in my life changed it completely. I couldn't thank her enough for what she's done for me."

"That is good. Now that we meet in better circumstances, do you have any questions to me?"

"Honestly, I have so many questions we could be talking all night, but I suspect you wouldn't answer most of them. So I'll just ask... do you know why I can talk to gengar?"

Suicune remained silent.

"Were you also the one who kept Ruby alive?"

"No," Suicune said. "Her survival was your doing."

"I see." A faint smile brightened Agnes's face. "Why did you save me? I thought you didn't want humans to know of your existence."

"That is true. I took a risk by revealing myself to you. I trust that you will keep your word?"

"I will. I made a promise."

"Good." Suicune nodded. "I saved you because you were indirectly important to us - much more so now after what you experienced in the hospital."

"So I was right? I really went to another world?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"We don't know. We are investigating. I may call on you for that purpose."

"I see. I'll be there then."

Agnes let out a deep sigh and pushed herself against the Suicune. There was a long silence during which her gaze was drawn back to the tall mountain.

She pointed to it. "Will I ever get to meet the others?"

"That decision is not mine to make."

"It doesn't feel right, you know. Keeping a secret from Ruby and Topa like this."

"It is a necessary secret, but if it grieves you, I will consider whether or not to trust them."

"I trust them. But I understand that there is more than just you at stake and you can't decide that on your own."

"Indeed."

There was another long silence. The mist in front of Agnes fluttered and moved in shapes like terrestrial clouds, and she watched the spectacle with a faint smile, her right hand on her stomach and her left hand holding one of Suicune's tails. After over a minute of contemplation, she seized her crutches and pushed herself up - with the help of the pokemon she laid against.

"Thank you for checking on me," she said. "I feel guilty for cuddling with you when I should be cuddling with Ruby instead."

"You should not. There is no shame in seeking warmth when you are cold. Before you go, I have one last matter."

Suicune stood as Agnes turned around to face her. She used her tails to pull a large stone the size of a human eye from the fluff of her mane and dropped it into Agnes's hands. It was a roughly cut brilliant gem of a dark blue colour reflecting the moonlight in spots of azure and white. As Agnes raised it up to the sky, it became transparent, dyeing the moon with the colour of the sea. Something liquid

permanently agitated the inside of the stone, disturbing the light that made it through, and revealing a few bubbles travelling incessantly within the confines of their minute realm.

"This is my gift to you," Suicune said. "I want you to keep it and never use it for anyone other than yourself. When you are ready, you will understand the significance of this stone."

"I... I don't know what you mean, but I will keep it with me. It would make a great necklace."

Suicune nodded. "Farewell, then, Agnes. Take good care of yourself and of Ruby. She is important in ways only you can understand. Until we meet again - I look forward to another hug."

"Goodbye, Suicune," Agnes said with a chuckle. "And thank you."

The mist that covered the lake gathered and enveloped the large pokemon. When it dissipated, Suicune was gone.

Agnes woke up late in the morning, still holding the Water Stone she had been gifted. She was alone in the tent, and splashing noises came from the outside, together with a comfortable scent of dew. She grabbed her crutches, slid the stone in her pocket, and hoisted herself out.

Ruby barked with joy when she exited the tent and rushed to her, her wagging tails throwing water all around her. Topa and the eevee continued playing together in the lake, taking turns splashing each other, and occasionally bouncing an inflatable ball between them.

"Good morning, Ruby," Agnes said. "Good morning, everyone. Come here, look what I found in the lake."

The pokemon gathered around her as she pulled the stone out of her pocket. They opened their mouths in awe, peeking at one another.

"I'm going to keep it as a souvenir," Agnes said. "Do you like it?"

Ruby sniffed at the stone, then nodded with energy.

"That's good! Okay, let's have breakfast and get ready to leave. I'm sorry I woke up so late."

Breakfast was quick. Agnes had prepared portions of wet and dry food for the eevee as well, who ate with enthusiasm with everyone else. While Ruby helped her human dismount the tent with her telekinesis, Topa kept playing with the wild pokemon until she was called back. The eevee got a short hug and a few pets before Agnes and her two pokemon turned back and left.

Agnes stopped as they were about to leave the clearing. She lowered her head, hesitated for a second, and turned around.

"Eevee," she called. "Do you want to come with us?"

The eevee looked up with wide eyes.

"You don't have to be alone," Agnes said. "You're welcome to join our family if you want to. But I would understand if you decided to stay."

The wild pokemon stared at Agnes in silence for a few seconds as everyone waited. She looked back, scanning the lake and the forest that surrounded it, and looked up at the White Hat.

She barked joyfully, tail wagging, and ran towards the human. Topa and Ruby celebrated her arrival with short hugs, and Agnes dropped to her knees to haul the eevee up and place her on her shoulder.

"Thank you," Agnes said. "We'll come back here, I promise. But for now, let's go home. We'll find you a name later, okay?"

The eevee barked with enthusiasm and Agnes stood. She peeked at the White Hat again, then at the bush where she had met Suicune,

and surreptitiously bowed to it before turning around and leaving the lake with a new friend and a bigger family.

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